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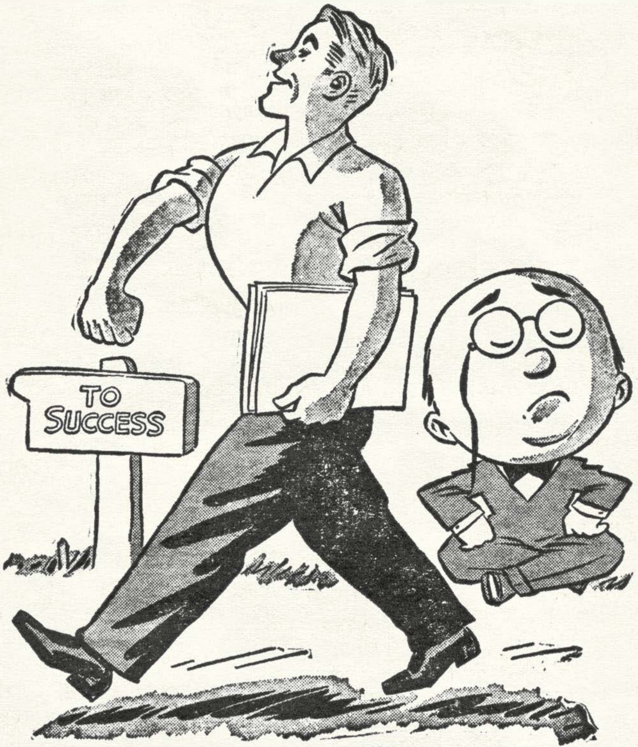

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Vol. LX, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION August, 1947

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By C. S. MONTANYE

Steve Dix, the private eye from Hollywood, steps into a nice mess of murder, blackmail and thuggery in a Nevada town which is wide open for every type of racketeering! 11

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Dwight Berke adds up a dark street, a pretty girl, and a lost shoe—and finds that the answer is two corpses!

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Where readers, writers and the editor meet

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by

WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

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Girl Trouble

Saunders McKane, known to his friends as "Sandy," is a private detective in Honolulu. It is a sultry, lazy afternoon when a little Filipino chap walks into Sandy's office. McKane knows him as a prizefighter and not a very good one at that. His name is Juan Mira.

"Girl trouble?" Sandy McKane wants to know. Sheepishly Mira admits that the detective is correct. Her name is Dolly Valdez—partly Chinese, partly Portuguese—maybe a little Hawaiian. She sang a little—danced a lot—was a bit of a flirt. Anyway, she hasn't been seen or heard from in over a week.

Mira insists on paying in advance and McKane *takes* the case. Out comes the old convertible and the detective goes for a ride. Clues begin to gather. So do pink, purple and fancy cooling drinks as Sandy visits several of the places where Dolly Valdez used to work—the Hula Hut, Kealia Pikaki Room, Jerome's. In one of the places he meets that big fellow known as "Meat" Kozak who also used to fight. The detective and Kozak don't like each other at all.

But the meeting of the evening comes a little later. Linda Ramsay, of all people! Sandy McKane hasn't seen Linda since she was fifteen. Her father is *the* big sugar man of the islands—that's right—Curtis Ramsay. Linda introduces the detective to her fiance. He turns out to be Jefferson Raleigh, polo-playing, cafe-society scion of one of the first families of the islands. It is a gay evening—a kaleidoscope of color, music, enticing laughter, moonlight and the scent of the ginger flowers, which is every color—"every color but one."

Corpse of a Lady

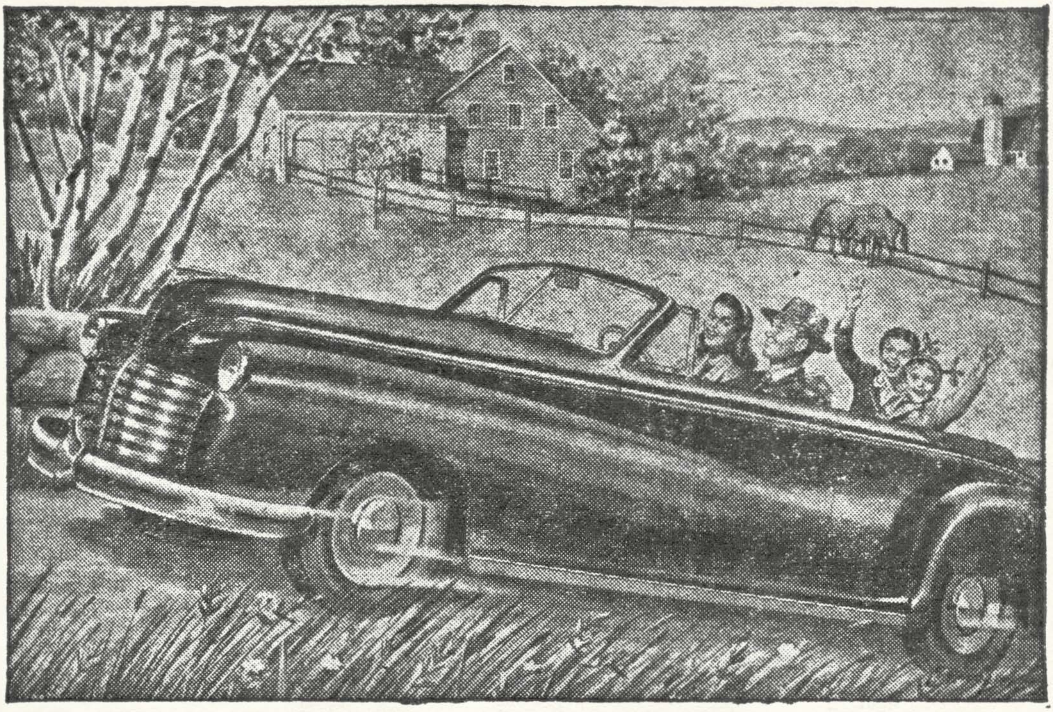
But Sandy McKane, private detective, doesn't feel a bit like that when he wakes up the next morning. He is in a strange room. There is a lady in the room with him, only she is a very dead lady. From the picture he was given by her mother, he knows the lady is none other than Dolly Valdez. She has been brutally strangled. Yes, there is hibiscus in her hair!

Just as McKay decides to phone for the police, they make themselves known. They have been watching him. The police don't hold McKay. They give him to understand however, that he is under suspicion.

The next day McKay is surprised to learn that Mira, the little pugilist, bears him no

(Continued on page 8)

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet



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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

ill-will either. The little Filipino even pays him another installment on the agreed fee. Inasmuch as McKay didn't find the living Dolly, perhaps he can find out who killed her. There seems to be but one fly in the ointment. Mira won't tell McKay his real business!

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Orbit, not to mention his co-worker and dream girl, Libby Hart.

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She isn't in the so-called Florentine Room either. Johnny orders a short beer and sits down to wait. Esthay, spotting the young reporter, kids him about the "lone wolf" stuff. Johnny notices one Dolf Callise along with Esthay, the same Callise with a rep as a jewel-snatcher, even though the police haven't been able to pin anything on him up to now. He is the Dolf Callise who is more than suspected of pulling that Park Avenue job in the Westcott apartment—that's right, the one that brought in the sixty grand insurance.

When Libby Hart finally arrives, she tells Johnny that the paper has given her an as-

(Continued on page 109)

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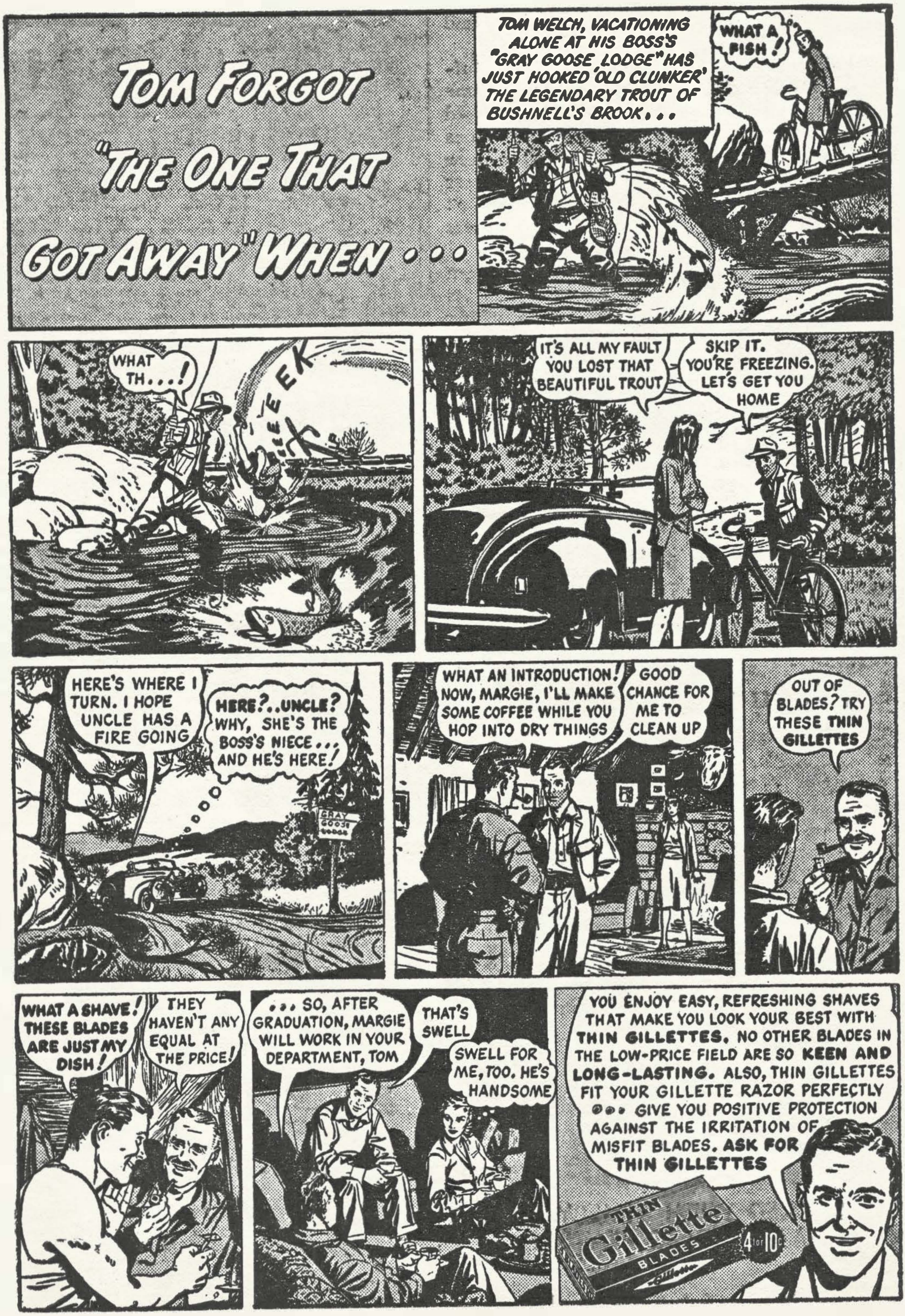
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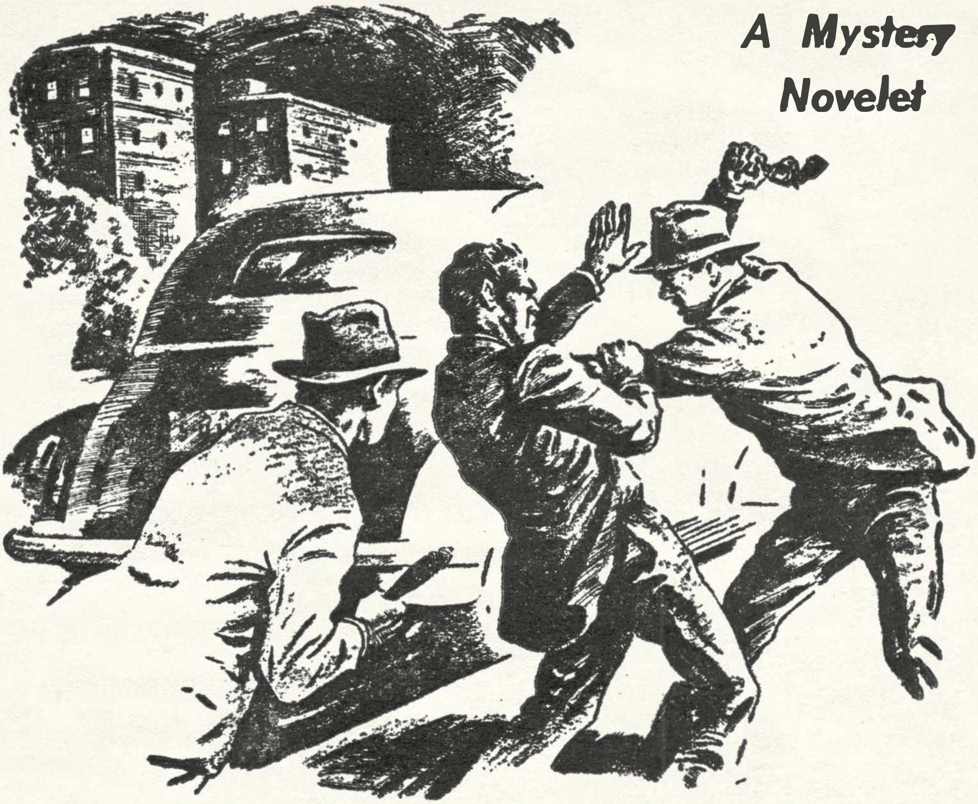


Shavelle reversed the gun barrel to use the weapon butt-first upon Steve Dix

MERRY MONTH OF MAYHEM

By C. S. MONTANYE

Steve Dix, the private eye from Hollywood, steps into a nice mess of murder, blackmail and thuggery in a Nevada town which is wide-open for every type of racketeering!

CHAPTER I

FIVE GRAND FOR A JOB

SHE sat at a desk that was as polished as her taffy-colored hair, in the anteroom of Mayor Jonathan Hargen's office. She was rather tall, Steve Dix decided. She wore a white blouse, unwrinkled despite the terrific noonday heat, and a powder-blue skirt. He couldn't see her gams from the side of the desk where he stood, but he had an idea they'd be all right.

The eyes focused on him were bluer than her skirt, purple in their depths. Dix liked the way the lashes curled up in a black fringe. She didn't use eye-shadow or any phony stuff. Even her curved, warm, red mouth was only lightly touched with lipstick.

In addition to all that, she looked intelligent, as sharp as a tack.

"The Mayor is expecting you, Mr.

Dix," she said. "Your plane must have been on time."

"On the dot," Dix told her.

She snapped down the lever on a sound box, pressed a button, and said in a rich, slightly husky voice, "Mr. Dix is here, Mayor Hargen."

A crisp reply crackled out of the box. "Have him wait a minute, Miss Madlyn. Ask Payson and Leach to come up."

Ann Madlyn nodded, smiled across at Dix, and used the telephone.

Dix sat down in a leather chair as new as the city hall. Which meant that it hadn't been used for more than a few weeks. He wondered what Mayor Hargen wanted from him. Something important or Hargen wouldn't have wired Dix's Los Angeles office. Hargen wouldn't have insisted that Dix leave everything and take the first plane to Laros, Nevada.

Dix shrugged. He had been pretty busy. This was May, and things had crowded in on him. The merry month of mayhem, he thought. People sowed the seeds of crime along with flowers. He listened absently to the girl talking over the telephone. Fascinating voice. Nice timbre, nice diction.

He fumbled for a cigarette, his mind going back to Hollywood and beautiful "Cappy" Tyne and Lou Diamond, her bodyguard. Dix had almost closed a business matter about the Excello Pictures star for Al Krakow, the producer. Mayor Hargen's wire had kept Dix from going over to the studio and laying the facts on the line for the producer.

Al Krakow could wait. Likewise, the temperamental Cappy Tyne.

AN ELECTRIC fan hummed from the top of a tall, chrome tube. It sounded like a bee. Dix listened, toying with the speculation of what Mayor Hargen wanted with him. Dix had been a private eye for a couple of years now. Long enough to know his way around.

The fan blew against rich book bindings in a pickled-pine bookcase. It stirred the light Nevada air. Waves of it blew against Dix's tanned, good-looking face. He shoved his long legs out further in front of him. The Madlyn girl finished her phone conversation.

"Hot town," Dix stated.

"I'm used to it. I rather like it."

He turned that over in his mind. From what he had seen of Laros since the four-motored transport had let him off at the Laros municipal airport, Dix thought her statement was open to debate.

A raw town, he decided, from his glimpse of it. A reasonable facsimile of Reno, a pocket edition of Las Vegas. A wide-open town, he understood. Card palaces and night spots, and all kinds of fancy vice for the asking.

After a while, two men came into the anteroom. They spoke to Ann Madlyn. After a glance at Dix, they went into Hargen's office.

"Payson and Leach?" Dix asked.

Miss Madlyn nodded and moistened a postage stamp on a rubber sponge. She fixed it to an envelope. She pressed it down firmly with the heel of her slender hand. "Bob Payson," she said, "is the highway commissioner. Leach is the city comptroller."

Before Dix could comment, the sound box hummed, "Ask Mr. Dix to come in."

The three politicians sat around a modernistic office that reminded Dix of the observation room in the Plantagenet Bar back in L.A. Long, glass windows were hung with Venetian blinds that shut out some of the burning sun. The walls were a delicate, pastel gray, like the color of a mourning dove. Against this background, black-glass cabinets and honey-colored furniture were set off to advantage.

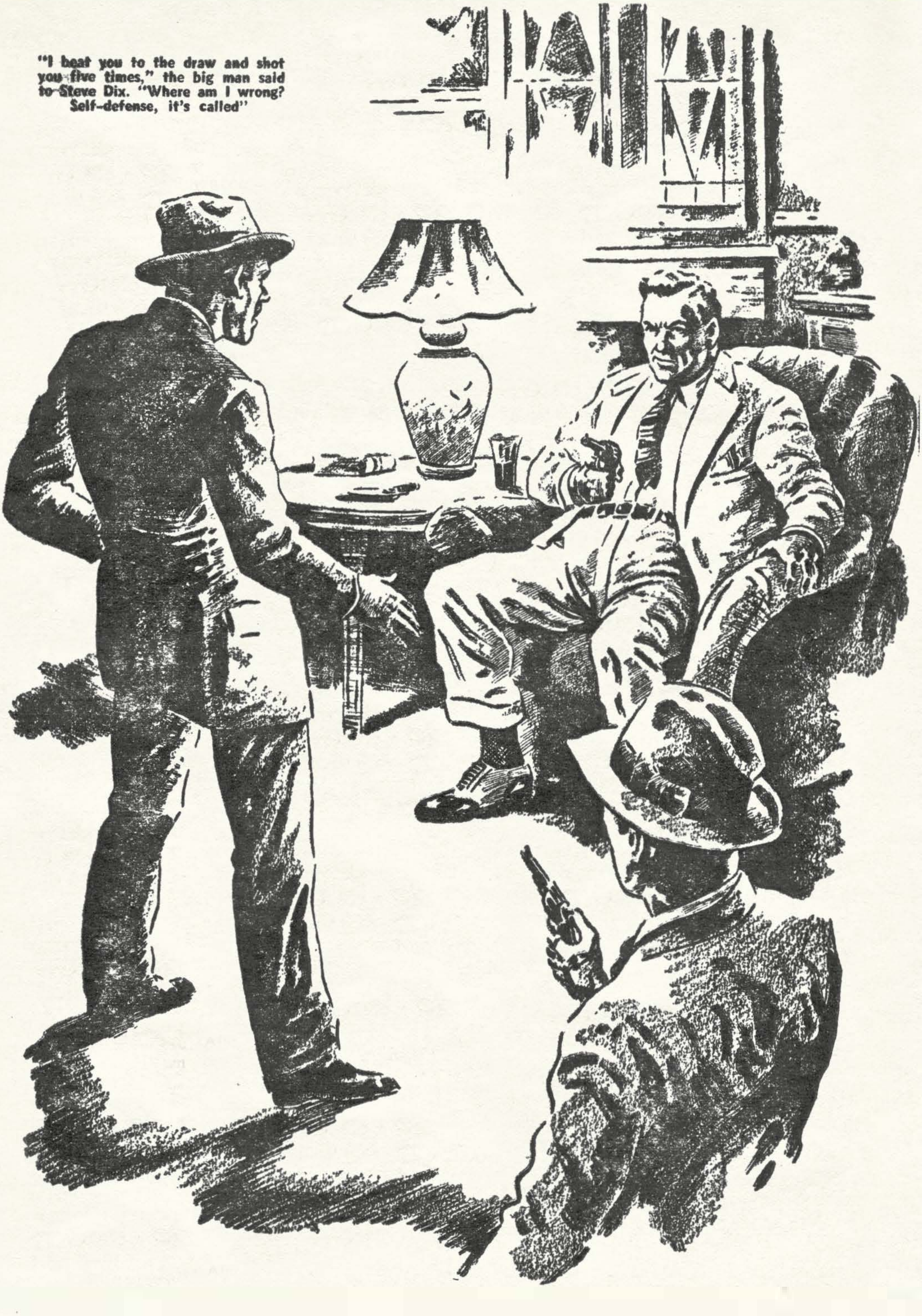
Dix shook hands with Jonathan Hargen. The mayor was a fat, red-faced, typical politician. He was doing something about the bald spot on the back of his round, over-large head. Some sticky substance glistened around the edges. He had false teeth, uppers and lowers. They didn't fit very well and clicked when he spoke.

"Dix, meet Robert Payson and Martin Leach, both part of my government."

Payson was a mild-looking man in his middle forties. Pleasantly colorless. A type you glanced at and forgot.

Leach was different. The comptroller was a big, broad-shouldered man with a tight face. He had a brooding look under his mink eyebrows. At some time

"I beat you to the draw and shot you five times," the big man said to Steve Dix. "Where am I wrong? Self-defense, it's called"



in his career his nose had been broken. It was still off-center. He had a deep cleft in his chin and a very small, thin-lipped mouth. Like the other two men, he wore a seersucker suit. His could have stood a pressing.

Dix sat down at the right of Mayor Hargen's immense, flat-topped desk. Leach got up and went to one of the black-glass cabinets. He opened it and came back with a bottle of scotch and glasses. Then he went over to a water cooler and took some ice cubes out of its rear drawer.

"Along about this time of day," he said, "I get thirsty."

He slopped liquor into four glasses and motioned to the water cooler for the others to help themselves.

DIX surreptitiously let most of his whisky trickle from his glass before he pressed the cooler's spigot. He always drank sparingly at these times, for whisky and hot weather don't mix. He took his glass back to his chair.

"I suppose you're wondering why I sent for you," Mayor Hargen began. "It's about a certain party here in town. Paul Graymar. He operates a place called the Chantilly on Main Street. Ever hear of him?"

"Not that I remember," Dix answered.

"Graymar," Hargen went on heavily, "is a menace to the good name of our community. He has a franchise for his place, but it's a dive. Unfortunately, he's clever. I can't close him up. He's good for two more years. There's nothing I can do about it."

Dix cooled his wrist against the glass beside him. Its icy touch felt good.

"What we want," Martin Leach broke in a bit impatiently, "is to get something on Graymar that will let the mayor move in. That shouldn't be hard. Graymar is as wide open as the range beyond Mount Baldy."

Bob Payson made no comment. Hargen took it from there.

"Martin means that Graymar's a bad *hombre*. I've heard enough and know enough to understand he's a criminal character. We don't want him here. He's no asset. Personally, we three are willing to pay a substantial fee for spot evidence strong enough for us to crack down and run Graymar out of town."

"How much is the fee?" Dix sat up straighter.

"About five thousand," Payson said, speaking for the first time.

"But the evidence has got to be conclusive," Leach cut in rapidly. "It'll have to stand up before the citizens. It can't be a phony push-out, a trumped-up charge. It's got to be authentic, and it's got to be filed within the next ten days."

"Interested?" Hargen asked Dix, knuckling his red face with a pudgy hand.

"I'll try it for size." Dix reached for another cigarette. "I'll have to have one half the money down in advance. And I want a lot of particulars about Graymar."

"Both are okay." The fat mayor opened a drawer in his desk. "Martin will have the cash for you later this afternoon. You're staying at the Mansion House?"

"I left my bag there," Dix replied.

"Martin will meet you at the bar there at—"

"Say four-thirty," Martin Leach filled in.

"And here," Hargen continued, taking a long envelope from the drawer, "is a word picture of Graymar's background, as much as we've been able to dig up."

Dix put the envelope in his pocket without opening it. Hargen added a few more particulars. Dix felt they weren't necessary. He had the setup pretty well in mind. Three men were trying to hang a fourth. Five Gs to make a wedge to open the way.

Dix shrugged his shoulders, wondering why he should care about their civic differences. Five grand was five grand.

"At four-thirty at the Mansion House bar," Dix said and went out.

Ann Madlyn, riffling through some legal-looking documents, lifted her long-lashed gaze when Dix shut the door of the Mayor's office and crossed the anteroom.

"Mr. Dix," she said as he picked up his felt hat from the chair where he had left it. He half turned, and she shot a quick glance at the door he had closed. Her husky voice dropped a pitch. "After dark," she said, "this town is apt to be a bit dangerous, if you don't know your way around. It might be a good idea to be a little careful."

"Thanks. I'll remember that."

She smiled as he went out to a gleaming, marble-tile corridor. So the girl with the taffy-colored hair was warning him. Nice of her, Dix thought.

CHAPTER II

THE LADY WAITS

THE Mansion House was as new and as modern as the city hall. A sprawling, over-pretentious structure with a flamboyant lobby and an air that seemed to ask what Reno had that Laros didn't have.

Dix registered. A thin, anemic-looking bellhop in a royal-purple uniform and a red, pillbox cap banged Dix's airplane suitcase into one of the three elevators. Then he led the way down a wide, mossy-carpeted corridor.

"Right in here, sir."

The boy pushed open the unlocked door of room three hundred and eighty-nine. He set Dix's bag down on a luggage rack. Dix gave him half a dollar.

"What's your name, son?" the private eye asked.

"Felix."

"Like it around here?"

"It's not bad when we're doing business. Some day this is going to be the divorce center of the country. I'll do better when that time comes."

Dix grinned as Felix went out. Dix shut the door and looked at his accommodations. Comfortable enough. A good-sized room and a hall with a bath at its end. A glass-enclosed shower. A big wardrobe closet stood midway between the bathroom and the bedroom. He opened his suitcase and hung up a tropical-weight suit.

His gun was in the bottom of the suitcase. A .38 caliber Bronson-Garland automatic of British manufacture. He left the rod there and put the suitcase on the wardrobe shelf.

Then he adjusted the Venetian blind and sat down to read about Paul Graymar. . . .

Martin Leach came into the Frontier Bar of the Mansion House when the topaz-faced clock over its entrance pointed to four-thirty exactly. Leach ordered two planters punches and sat down opposite Dix in a compartment. He took an envelope out of his pocket.

"Twenty-five hundred dollars," Leach said, passing it over. "I wouldn't count it here. You'll find it's the right amount."

Dix put the envelope into the inner pocket of his smartly tailored flannel coat with one word. "Thanks."

"Have chance to read what the mayor gave you?" Leach asked.

"I glanced through it."

"We're only interested in results," Leach said. "We've been told that you deliver. You're said to be the best private operator in California. You've been working for Excello Pictures."

Dix looked at him curiously. "Who told you? That was supposed to be confidential."

"We picked it up," Leach said carelessly. "The point is to get rid of Graymar. You won't find us ungrateful. We can do you a lot of good."

Dix knew what he meant. Cleaning up an assignment satisfactorily would bring Dix plenty of future business from Laros. Leach meant that when the town began to challenge Reno on divorces, there'd be plenty of scratch for any private eye if he had the right connections.

"I'm getting busy immediately," Dix said.

Leach had another drink, then said he had an appointment to keep. Dix bought an afternoon copy of the local newspaper, the *Leader*, and he went up to his room.

The minute he unlocked the door, he knew that somebody had been nosing around since he had left the room an hour before.

He stood still and let his gaze wander. The prowler hadn't closed the bottom drawer of the bureau far enough. He must have looked under the pillow of the high-mattressed bed. The George Washington counterpane wasn't as neat as when Dix had first come in.

Dix took his suitcase down from the wardrobe shelf. He opened it and found that his gun was missing.

DIX put the suitcase back on the shelf and narrowed his eyes. After a minute, he picked up the phone and asked a sultry-voiced operator to send Felix up. He counted the money in Leach's envelope while he waited. Then he took a five-dollar bill from his poke and folded it lengthwise.

"Somebody stopped in to visit me when I was downstairs," Dix said when the boy came in. "Any ideas?"

Felix looked at the bill. "One or two."

"I'll buy them both."

The bill changed hands.

"Lenny Sertig, the chief of police," the bellhop revealed. "Sertig and Hen Vasson came up about five minutes after you went down. They got your key from Ronald Bates. He's the clerk who registered you."

"Where's the police headquarters?" Dix asked.

"Down two blocks, over one."

The jail was connected with the police headquarters building, which was brick and had an authoritative look to it. Two expensive prowl cars with the town's name and numbers painted on the doors stood at the curb, one behind the other.

Dix went into the building. A frowsy, heat-wilted police sergeant was at the high desk. He lolled back in his chair, doing things with a toothpick. He looked at Dix, yawned, and registered more interest in his second glance.

"Chief in?" said Dix.

"I guess so. Who wants to see him?"

"I do."

"What's the name? What's your business?"

"Name's Dix and my business is none of yours."

Before the sergeant could answer him, a door to the left opened. A man came through it. He was as bald as an egg, with a thin, sharp face. He wore sloppy pants and a cowboy shirt to which a police badge was attached, and a wide belt with a holstered gun on his right hip.

"This party wants to see the chief," the desk sergeant said. "His name is Dix, Hen."

Hen Vasson turned around and looked Dix over. He looked him over carefully and critically, down to the last inch.

"I guess that's all right," Vasson spoke with a slow drawl. "Go right in, sport." He nodded to the door he had come through."

Dix passed him. The place he entered was a sort of waiting room to the chief's star chamber beyond. It held a table large enough for card games, chairs, and a lumpy sofa.

Dix pushed open a half-shut door at the back and breathed in the spicy smell of pipe smoke. Chief Len Sertig was at his littered desk, his feet comfortably crossed on its open, top drawer. A blackened, corncob pipe was clamped between his gold-filled teeth. Like Vasson, he was in trousers and shirt.

Sertig reminded Dix of a bloodhound. He had the same kind of dragged-down, red-rimmed eyes, and a loose dewlap and weathered skin that hung in folds. His hair was rough and matted, his gaze impersonal and expressionless.

He was about six-feet-two. He reminded Dix of a horse-opera character. He might have stepped out of a grade B Western, the kind with which Excello Pictures paid their overhead.

"I want to report a stolen gun," Dix said as he stood a foot away from the desk.

Sertig gave him a casual glance. He tapped his pipe empty on a run-down boot heel and set it on the desk.

"Talk to Johnson outside."

"I'm talking to you." Dix kept his tone amiably even. "The shooter was lifted from my room at the Mansion House while I was downstairs in the bar. I want it back."

"What's your name?"

"You know it. You knew it well enough to get my room key from the desk clerk. Look, Sertig, I'm here on business. I might need that gun. Hand it over."

The police chief tilted back in his chair. A half smile began to make more creases in his leathery face. He aimed at a brass cuspidor, missed, and yawned.

"Private detective, aren't you? We don't like 'em in this town. I don't know anything about your gun. Make the usual complaint with the desk sergeant, and we'll do the best we can."

With an effort Dix kept his temper in control. So that was it? Sertig must have known about his plane reservation. Sertig must have checked Laros's several hotels. But why?

Dix turned on his heel and went on through to the front of the building. Hen Vasson, propped against the railing below the sergeant's desk, gave him a stare.

"Everything all right, stranger?"

"For me but I don't know about you boys," Dix laughed and went out.

THE Nevada night came down like a purple curtain, suddenly and all-at-once. As if by signal, Laros turned on its incandescent finery. Its main thoroughfare blazed with multi-colored lights. By day, the long wide principal street had been sun-baked and deserted.

As Dix now left the police station, the street was full of people and traffic. He got the feel of Reno for the first time. Lights and vibrant movement. Fluent, restless crowds and the hum of car engines.

The Chantilly was almost diagonally across from the Mansion House. Its neon sign, an elaborate signature in gold and crimson, winked on and off. Dix leisurely waited for the traffic to stop, then crossed to the night club.

He went in to overdone decor. Pseudo-embassy stuff. Hanging tapestries, frescoed ceilings, little lamps that hung like silver stars. An orchestra whispered persuasively for the dinner guests. Later, a hot-jump, broadcast band would take over.

Dix steered his way to the hat-check counter. A little blonde with heavily carmined lips and blue eye-shadow welcomed him with a big smile. He looked at her glassy-perfect hair-do and laid his hat before her.

She gave him a brass check. He put that in his pocket, marveling at her hair. It looked as if it would break if he touched it. It looked like spun sugar.

"Stranger?" she asked.

"You've made your point. Roll again."

Dix smiled and her eyes came up to meet his coquettishly. She had a nice figure, stream-lined, gently rounded in the right places.

"Your name is Dix," the girl said. "You're in from L.A."

"What else?" Dix stopped smiling.

"There's a lady waiting for you in the main dining room. She told me to tell you when you came in. That's about all, except that I'm off duty at ten-after-twelve."

Dix went down some steps and into the room where the music murmured. He saw the lady almost at once at a table set for two.

"I guess I'm a little late," he said to Ann Madlyn, pulling out the chair opposite. "You shouldn't have waited."

In the mayor's office Ann Madlyn had been attractive to Dix. Now, against the colorful background of the Chantilly, she stood out like a Broadway beauty in line of scrub women. She wore a white dress. Plain, severely simple, but richly perfect.

She was hatless and her taffy-colored hair glimmered with hidden gleams. The purple in her eyes seemed accented, too. Her femininity was warm and compelling. So was the perfume that Dix caught when he shook out a napkin and smiled across at her.

"You figured I'd drift around?"

"Naturally. I counted on it."

"That's nice."

He began to lose most of his afternoon annoyance. An odd anticipation tingled through him. He hadn't felt this way since the evening he had clinched the Cappy Tyne matter after obtaining the information he had stalked down.

"Ordered?" he asked.

She hadn't, so he did, and then she asked, "How do you like our town?"

"It's better after dark. Native?"

She shook her head. "No, I came here from Iowa several years ago with my dad. He was general manager of Regal Silver before he died. I started doing secretarial work for Jonathan Hargen before he took office. He has a large ranch at Seven Forks, a really big spread. When the reform crowd elected him, he brought me along to City Hall."

Dix absorbed that along with his martini. There was a hint of loyalty in her tone. Loyalty toward the red-faced, fat Mayor. Dix discounted it and asked who had found out about him in Los

Angeles. She said that Leach had done so. Dix noticed the way she held her cocktail glass, how tapering her fingers were.

"He seems to know all about your work," she added.

"Tell me about Leach and Payson."

"They're both part of Laros." She spoke slowly, carefully. "Born and brought up here, native sons."

"Level?"

"Of course!" Her blue eyes flashed. "Mayor Hargen only has honest people holding office in his administration."

"I just asked. What about this Paul Graymar they want the finger on?"

Something in her expression made Dix stop. It was like the wave of a red lantern. The look vanished instantly, and a smile replaced it. Her eyes moved to a point over Dix's shoulder.

"Good evening, Mr. Graymar," she said.

CHAPTER III

Slugged and Framed

DIX got up. The man who had paused beside their table, was small and nondescript. That afternoon, Dix had formed a mental picture of the man he was being paid five thousand dollars to run out of town. It was nothing like Graymar himself.

Paul Graymar in white coat and dark blue trousers could easily have been mistaken for one of the band men. Or one of the hired help. He was narrow in face, shoulders, and torso. Delicately made, with little hands and feet, but his eyes were alert enough, bright and intelligent eyes, set well back in his skull.

"Delighted." Graymar offered Dix his hand after Ann Madlyn introduced him. "Staying long, Mr. Dix?"

"I don't know."

"You'll like it here," Graymar assured him. "After your first few sweats. I gave myself a week when I first arrived. Wild horses couldn't pry me away now."

He exchanged a few more words and wandered on to another table. Dix sat down. He wondered if the typed report on Graymar was straight stuff, or if Leach and His Honor had touched it up for their own purposes. If they were right, the little man should be measured for a noose.

It was after nine when Dix and Ann Madlyn finished their demitasses. They went out to the street. There were three taxis at the curb in front of the Chantilly.

"I'll take you home," Dix said, handing her into one of the cabs, then sitting down beside her.

"You forgot your hat. Or didn't you wear one?"

The cab drove off.

"I left it there." Dix touched the brass check in his pocket. "Always a reason for going back later. You'd better tell the hackie where you live."

She did and turned to him quickly. "You're going back tonight?"

"I want a better view of that sink of iniquity." Dix laughed. "You blocked my vision. According to Hargen, Graymar's place is a hotbed of vice. I've got to see for myself despite what you said this afternoon about it being dangerous. Exactly what did you mean by that?"

"We're not entirely grown-up yet in Laros." She made the statement sound like a quotation from a primer. "This is still the West, rough under its veneer. We're civilized to a point. Anyone who doesn't understand us, who walks blindly—"

She broke off. Dix breathed in the fragrance that hung around her.

"That anyone has only himself to blame if he gets cut down," Dix said. "Fair enough. I'm getting the picture in pieces. Funny but Paul Graymar doesn't look like a desperado."

"I don't know anything about him," she said hastily.

"Or Police Chief Sertig?"

In the dusk of the cab Dix could see her eyes. Like stars in the gloom, they were looking straight at him.

"Leonard Sertig is Martin Leach's appointment," she said precisely. "Maybe you don't think Sertig is what he should be. As I said before, we're still growing. We need a man like Sertig to keep order."

The taxi had reached the outskirts of the city. It went down a quiet street.

To Dix's surprise, he saw a row of three-story apartment houses on the left. Neat brick-and-wood dwellings. Each had a Saguaro cactus heavy with orchidlike blooms on the front lawn.

The taxi stopped before the second house. Dix paid the driver.

"You don't want me to wait?" the taxi man asked.

"I'll walk."

The taxi rolled off. Dix followed Miss Madlyn up a paved walk to a white door. She took a key from her smart bag. She looked at him speculatively.

"Thank you for dinner and for bringing me home. You shouldn't have bothered."

There was a note of finality in her tone that told Dix he wasn't going to be asked in.

"It was a pleasure," he said. "I mean that." He did. "Well, good night. I'll be seeing you at the main place."

"Good night, Mr. Dix."

The white door opened and closed. A light went on in a second-floor window when he reached the sidewalk. He looked at it, shrugged his shoulders, and started down the street.

Whose side was Ann Madlyn on? Dix remembered the defensive note in her voice when Hargen had been mentioned. He thought about Paul Graymar and the hat left at the Chantilly. He decided he had better get busy and start to earn his fee.

A BLOCK beyond the row of apartment houses, the night closed in tightly. There were open stretches of terrain. The glow of Main Street was a mile and a half beyond. It might have been Dix's imagination but it seemed cooler. He liked to walk. Somehow, it seemed to help him think better when he was in motion.

He had gone no more than a half block farther when a car came up even with him. It went on a short distance, stopped, and two men got out of it.

"Just a minute, friend," one of the men called to Dix. "We're looking for Over Rock Road."

Dix stopped. He began to turn sideways to keep them both in front of him. He had the impression that they were of a similar size. They wore gray hats and had their hands in their pockets. The one who had spoken advanced. The other cut into the right. And Dix found he was between them.

"Sorry, but I'm a stranger here," Dix started to say when a sixth sense telegraphed a warning.

The man who had cut in on him lunged forward. Dix threw himself to one side. The sap that struck at Dix viciously whizzed by his head, missing by inches.

Dix tried to grapple with the other man. Dix did get a fingerhold on his coat. This man had drawn a gun, and he ripped out an oath as he reversed the barrel in his hand to make the butt an excellent bludgeon.

His foot tripped and this accident probably saved Dix's life. As the man went off balance, his gun butt struck Dix a glancing blow on the side of the head. Dix pitched forward, clawing at the empty air.

"Okay, Shavelle! That does it!"

Something more was said, but Dix

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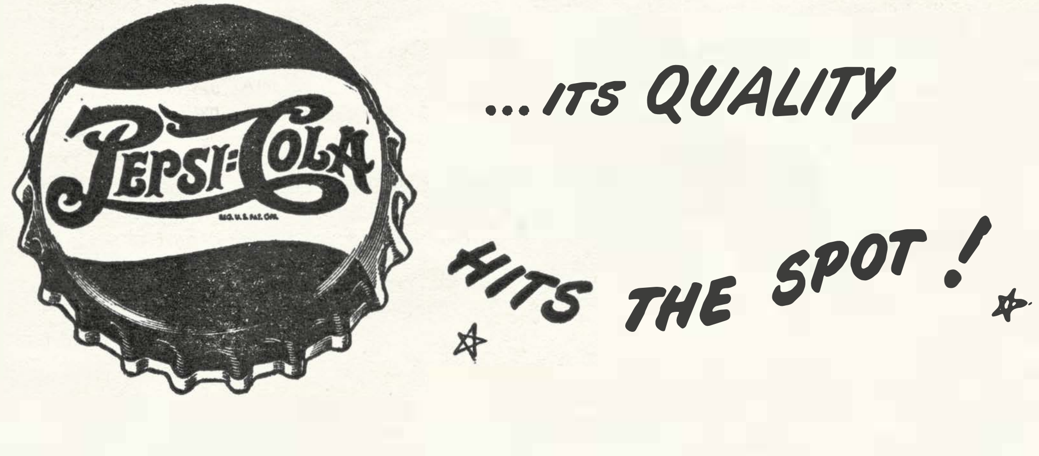


PEPSI-COLA
REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.
...ITS QUALITY
HITS THE SPOT!

didn't hear it. Blackness welled up to ring him in and pull him down into its far, feathery depths. . . .

When Dix stepped up to the hat-check counter of the Chantilly an hour later, the little blonde with the glass-like hair and the carmined mouth gave him a heavy-lidded inspection. The Chantilly was crowded now. The jump band beat it out, and voices and dancing feet mingled in vibrant overtones. The blonde drew her thinly arched brows together.

"What happened to you?"

Dix touched the patch of plaster over his right ear.

After he had snapped out of it, he had gone back to his room at the Mansion House and had fixed himself up with a drink and some home first-aid. Only his skin had been cracked. The man called "Shavelle" had probably figured for a fractured skull at least.

"My hat, if you please." Dix handed over the brass check.

"I get off pretty soon now." She lowered her voice, making it private between them.

"Where'll I find Graymar?" Dix asked.

The girl looked a little disappointed and hurt. She drew a breath and touched her chin with a mahogany-tipped finger.

"What would you give to know?" she asked coyly.

"Look, darling, don't let's play games. Believe it or not, I'm a busy man. I've got work to do. Where's your boss?"

She told him, and Dix thanked her before he went up a flight of stairs. He got a little of what Mayor Hargen had meant that afternoon when he went down a large corridor. Behind its thin partition he heard the whirr of a roulette wheel and the droning conversation of many voices. He heard the familiar click of dice ricocheting off what he knew was a rubber-sided table. He heard the clink of chips, the tinkle of ice in glasses, laughter, excited or forced.

Dix went on down to the far end of the corridor. He stopped before a door that was stenciled with the word OFFICE. Its transom was lowered, its glass painted with inner light. The door was unlocked. Dix opened it and walked in.

He shut the door behind him, stiffened to stone. It was a regulation office. A couple of desks and steel, filing cabinets kept company with a hooded typewriter on a table. Framed sporting prints were on the walls. A photograph of Jack Johnson mowing down the great Jeffries that long-ago afternoon. A picture of Sun Beau when the horse had been the nation's leading-money winner. Pictures of stage favorites, burlesque queens. But Dix saw those things last.

HIS gaze, strained and taut, went to Paul Graymar—to where Graymar lay half behind his desk and half out on the office floor. The man was doubled up and definitely dead.

Dix moved in closer. A lamp on the desk shed triangular illumination, just enough for the private detective to see the round dark hole in the center of Graymar's forehead. Dix studied it, shifting his glance to the pool of coagulated blood that the owner of the Chantilly had leaked.

The shoulder of Graymar's white coat was soaked with crimson, and so was the floor behind the desk. Dix let his eyes sweep on. There didn't seem to be any gun in evidence. There wasn't any. He was sure of that after he had investigated.

A single-door, steel safe between the windows was open. Its cash box had been yanked out and tossed into a corner. A few coins lay around. Dix used an elbow to push the safe door open wider.

He squatted in front of it. A hard, cynical smile began to twist the corners of his mouth. Mayor Hargen and his two associates had wanted Graymar run out of town. It was too late for that now. Graymar would ride away in a horizontal position. They didn't have to worry about him any more. Graymar was completely out of their way, and their purpose had been accomplished. Whatever the purpose was!

Dix helped himself to some of the documents in the back of the safe. He skimmed through them, selecting one or two and tucking them away in his jacket. He worked fast. He didn't want to be walked in on. He had an idea that Police Chief Sertig would like very much to find him at the safe with Paul Graymar's body across the room.

Finally, Dix got up. Using his handkerchief to wipe his prints from the inner and the outer knobs of the door, the detective waited until the wide corridor was empty.

He started down the stairs but stopped midway. Below him, he had a view of the foyer and the hat-check counter. The blondie was busy with an out-going customer, a well-built handsome young man with inky-black hair and a Latin look. His profile was as sharply clear as that on a new coin. His smile showed a perfect line of flashing white teeth in his brown-skinned face.

He retrieved an expensive Panama hat, gave it a rakish slant, and turned to a woman. She was glancing into one of the pillar mirrors and wiping a little lipstick from the corner of her full, curved mouth.

Dix's fingers tightened on the bronze, staircase rail. He had no trouble in recognizing Lou Diamond as the man in the Panama hat. And Cappy Tyne, the Excello Picture star, was the woman looking into the narrow mirror.

Dix's eyes narrowed. He hadn't expected to run across either or both in Laros, Nevada.

Cappy Tyne was supremely lovely in a lime-green gown that was a chalice for all her opulent charms. She wasn't as tall as Ann Madlyn or, to Dix's way of thinking, as intriguing to the senses. Cappy's charm was a sort of manufactured loveliness. Too perfect, a trifle too obvious.

She wore no hat. Her chestnut hair cascaded to her shoulders, so sleek and together that no one strand of it was visible from the others. Her oval face, almost gold in the shine of the silver lamps, looked enameled. Her eyes were a greenish-gray, elongated, lazy as a cat's. Her figure was flawless all the way down from shoulder to ankle.

She had, Dix knew, come a long way in the past year, up out of nowhere, a cinematic sensation, a box-office smash. Now the matter of a contract renewal with Excello Pictures was on Al Krakow's desk. Cappy Tyne was shooting for a high take. So many pictures a year, so much per picture. Krakow couldn't afford to turn her down, yet there were extenuating circumstances. And it was Steve Dix who would give the producer the final word to say in the end.

Cappy Tyne took Diamond's arm. She shifted the silver fox she carried, gave it to him, laughed at something he said, and went across the foyer and out through the main door.

Dix continued down the stairs. The check girl had her back turned in order to wedge a ticket into one of the straw hats on the rack. The manager had come up the steps from the dining room. He looked hard at Dix.

Dix went on out to the street. His mind hummed like a plucked violin string. He crossed the pavement and went into the Mansion House. There were quite a few people in the flamboyant lobby. He stopped at the desk. Bates was off and a new clerk was on night duty.

"Miss Tyne registered here?" Dix asked.

"Yes, sir." The clerk's tone was hearty, his smile expansive. "She has the Silver Suite on the fourth floor. She's not in at the moment. If there's a message—"

"There isn't, thanks."

Dix went to an elevator. He hadn't bothered leaving his key when he had gone out. He fingered it when the lift slid to a stop. He opened his door, switched on a lamp on a table beside the bed, and pulled the Venetian blind as high as it would go.

CHAPTER IV

On the Lam

OUTSIDE, a balcony ran from one end of the building to the other. Broad, iron stairs zigzagged down from floor to floor. A few wan stars struggled mistily in the vault of the night sky. The garish reflection of the main thoroughfare was like the flame of a bonfire.

Dix stood for a minute, looking out. He went back and sat down on the edge of the bed. He took out what he had brought away from the safe in Paul

Graymar's office, a couple of letters and what might have been a cash book.

He thumbed through the book, his face shadowed. But he had turned only a few pages when he heard the elevator click to a stop and voices sound in the hall.

Footsteps came up and ended at his door. As the knob began to turn, Dix quickly put the little book and the letters under the pillow on the bed. He had hardly time to smooth the George Washington counterpane back in place before a knock, staccato and insistent, beat out on the panels of the door.

Chief Sertig and the bald-headed Hen Vasson pushed past him when Dix opened the door. Vasson, sucking on an inch of cigarette, shut the door, then turned the key in the lock and pocketed it. Sertig ambled over to Dix.

"Just stay where you are," said the chief of police. "Don't make any wrong moves. We're taking a look around."

Dix's mouth tightened. He could feel his nerves begin to crawl and then grow taut. He looked from the leathery-faced police chief to Vasson.

"I suppose you've got a search warrant, or don't you need 'em in this town?"

"And don't talk," Sertig ordered.

"I'll nose around," Vasson said.

"You've got the equipment to do it with," Dix told him. "For your information, I'm working for Mayor Hargen. I think I'll telephone him and see what he has to say about this."

Sertig hit him with a hamlike fist when Dix started to pass him. It was a dirty blow, brought up at an angle. Unexpected and hard. Dix staggered and sat down on the bed. He caught the wooden footpost and held on. Twice in one night, a sock with a gun butt, and then a bunch of knuckles. He shook his head to clear it.

Sertig loomed up before him, big against the lamplight. "Look around, Hen. See what you can find. I'll keep this guy quiet."

Vasson went into the hall. Dix heard him strike a match after the wardrobe door creaked open. He heard Vasson fumbling around.

Then came the baldheaded man's exclamation: "I got it, Chief! Right here on the floor!"

Vasson came back, an open handkerchief in his hand. On top of it, Dix saw his own automatic.

Sertig grunted approval, sucking air through his teeth. "I guess that's enough. I'm wrong all around if it ain't the gun that washed out Graymar. You're in, Dix. Get up and we'll take a walk. You're under arrest on suspicion of murder."

Dix acted fast. His foot shot up and landed with remarkable and tremendous accuracy in the pit of Police Chief Sertig's stomach. The man belched half a scream of agony and dropped back.

Vasson, his hands busy with the handkerchief-wrapped gun, was an open target for the straight right Dix planted in his face. Dix felt Vasson's teeth bend under the impact of the blow. Sertig's bald-headed deputy backed all the way to the wall. He banged off it, spat blood, collided with a chair, and fell sprawling. He let go of the gun. It skidded across the floor, and Dix grabbed it.

Dix didn't wait longer. He went through the window, taking part of the curtain with him. The broad, iron stairs were just beyond, past a series of lighted windows. He went down them fast.

That brought him to a cul-de-sac at the hotel's rear near the garages. Dix cut down a cement ramp and hurried out to the main thoroughfare. A prowl car stood some little distance from the Mansion House. But no one was flatfooting toward it.

Dix signaled the first empty taxi that came along, passed an address to the driver, and hauled out the gun. A sniff of the barrel told its own story. So did the empty shell in its clip. Dix stowed the rod away and knit his brows. Unless he was mistaken, and Dix knew he wasn't, the round black hole in Paul Graymar's forehead had been made by his, Dix's gat.

He sat back on the cab's worn upholstery, thinking hard. The rig had angles. Somebody wanted to see that he got a breath of gas, the gas Nevada gives killers. Who? Why? Dix shook his head.

A few minutes later, the taxi pulled in at the second building in the row of apartment houses on the outskirts of town. Dix told the man to wait, went by the Saguaro cactus, and, after inspection, pressed a bell in the tiny vestibule.

ALMOST at once, the electrically controlled latch clicked. Ann Madlyn had her door open when he arrived upstairs. He had the impression of taffy-colored hair shimmering and haloed with light. She wore a raspberry-pink housecoat and perhaps not much else. Mexican slippers held her small, high-arched, bare feet. She hadn't been asleep. There was no drowsiness in her pretty face or blue eyes.

She held the door wide, shutting it after Dix came in. He stood in a room furnished as a lounge, a comfortable place of chintz and varnished reed, of cool walls about the same color as the gown Cappy Tyne had been wearing. Flowers were clustered in a white vase. A copper-base lamp made a golden glow. The rug under his feet was Indian grass, in large geometric patterns.

"Graymar's been eliminated," Dix spoke quickly but quietly. "Within the last hour, your police chief and Vasson had it rigged for me to be brought in and taken care of. I left them both in my room at the hotel."

He saw her stiffen, her eyes wide and her warm mouth open. She didn't move, but he knew she was drawing together like a steel spring.

"You'd better get in touch with Mayor Hargen." Her husky voice wasn't entirely steady. "I don't know what this means."

"I do. Get him for me, please."

She picked up a French telephone. She called a number. She pressed one hand over the mouthpiece, staring steadily at Dix. He helped himself to a cigarette in an open, glass box. He dragged in smoke greedily as if he hadn't had a cigarette for days.

"They don't answer?" she asked the operator. "Are you sure? Six nine J. Keep trying, operator."

"What about Leach?" Dix suggested.

She shook her head, putting the telephone back on its cradle. The wonder had gone out of her face. The shadow of fear replaced it, a blend of sudden fear and worry. She went across to a small table-model radio, and snapped its switch.

While she waited for it to warm, she said thoughtfully, as if to herself, "Not Leach. I don't trust him. It's got to be Hargen. Where is he? He must be at the ranch."

A voice coming out of the radio interrupted. A precise, well modulated, deeply pleasant voice—

"We interrupt this program to bring you an important news flash from headquarters. Paul Graymar, owner of the popular Chantilly, was shot to death in his office tonight. The police are looking for Steve Dix, a Los Angeles private detective. So far, Dix hasn't been apprehended. His description is as follows—"

Ann Madlyn shut the radio off. Dix mashed his cigarette in a tray and pulled up his sleeve to look at his watch.

"Keep pegging away at Hargen," he advised. "I want protection. I have an in on what this is all about. Let me have your telephone number, and I'll call you back. I left a cab at the door. I'm going back to town."

She touched his sleeve. "Is that wise? They'll pick you up."

"I've got to. I've got to beat them to the draw. If Sertig trips me while the ends are untied, I'm as good as gone. They probably love lynchings in this town. Didn't you say you weren't quite civilized? And I'm allergic to hemp."

Ann Madlyn's hand stayed on his sleeve. "Wait until I get Hargen. He'll know what to do. You can stay here."

"Not a chance, because they know all about this charming spot. A couple of hoodlums followed us when I brought you home. Sertig's sure to stop in. Don't worry. I've been in close quarters before. This is going to work out all right, but get Hargen."

He jotted down her telephone number and let her open the door. For an instant she stood close to him. The same fragrance he had caught at dinner reached him.

Dix laughed under his breath and took her in his arms. Her lips were warm but unstirring under the pressure of his own. He could feel the flutter of her heart, the tremble of her slender hands on his shoulders. Then her lips awoke and responded.

Dix let her go and faded down the stairs. He was afraid there was a radio in the taxi, but there wasn't. The hackie sat slumped down under the wheel, half asleep. Dix piled into the vehicle and slammed the door to wake him up.

"Take me back to town," Dix ordered. "I'll tell you where to stop." He remembered something he had forgotten to ask the girl with the taffy hair. "You must ride a lot of guys. Know anybody named Shavelle?"

"Do I?" The driver turned his head. "A tough character, mister. Hangs out with Verne Stacey and that crowd. Used to do some box-fighting around Carson City."

"Who's Verne Stacey?"

"The big guy with the dough. Used to run the city hall before Hargen got elected. Stacey is out in the cold now. Only it ain't ever very cold around here. Stacey and all his mob, "Buddy" Shavelle included, they've been hungry since the reform party moved in."

Dix was interested. "Then there's none of the old guard left?"

"One lone sucker." The hackie snickered, mentioning a name. "Maybe they got him tied down, then mebbe not. Where did you say you want me to drop you?"

THE taxi stopped a block away from the Mansion House. Dix paid the meter charge and got out. He pulled his hat down close to his eyes. He didn't doubt that the bloodhound-eyed Sertig had a plant watching the Mansion House. From here through to the wind-up, Dix understood, it was a question of how lucky he'd be.

For a second time, he went along the cement ramp to the cul-de-sac at the hotel's rear. He stood there in the shadows, searching the gloom for the sign of a sentry. Finally, he shrugged and started up the broad, iron steps.

He kept going until he reached the fourth floor. Momentarily, he expected a challenge from below and the whine of lead. But there was no sound except the nocturnal murmur of Laros. At the fourth floor, he walked the balcony to the building's east end.

The choice suites, one above the other, were located there. A softly lighted window shone like a beacon for Dix. He passed it and crouched beside a darkened window some little distance beyond it. The window was open at top and bottom.

Dix drew the lower sash up enough to climb through. He felt heavy carpet under the soles of his polished, custom-built shoes. The smell of cigarette smoke, faint and pungent, drifted to him. He waited until his eyes became accustomed to the thick murk before he crossed to a door. He stood beside it and listened.

After a minute or two, he turned the knob slowly and quietly. A few feet of passage separated him from the parlor of the Silver Suite. A hanging drapery was at its arched doorway.

Cappy Tyne, still in the lime-green dress, had arranged herself comfortably on a brocaded sofa, one symmetrical leg drawn up so that its knee dented her slinky skirt. A frosty gin drink, half consumed, stood beside her, its essence of juniper aromatic on the warm, stirless air.

Dix watcher her for a minute longer. He pushed the drape aside and walked in. Cappy Tyne sat up with a jerk. Her face was a study in conflicting emotions.

He thought she had never registered surprise and fear to more convincing degree in any screen role. He saw her knuckles whitening as her small, shapely hands gripped the divan's arm.

Her eyes, like twin tourmalines, shone hard and very bright as they met his.

"You can't be too surprised." Dix continued walking until he reached the divan. "You knew I was down here."

"I didn't!"

He let that go and glanced around the highly decorated room. Some Hollywood stylist had probably been turned loose in it. Its silver motif, splashed with scarlet, made him think of a technicolor musical show. All it needed, Dix thought, were some under-dressed girls on some white horses.

"Where's the bodyguard?" he asked.

Cappy Tyne shook her head. "Lou left me a little while ago. He's gone."

"Where?"

Her eyes began to lose some of their first fright. Like a veil, he saw the mascara lashes come down over them. She moved further back among the cushions, brushing fingers lightly over her hair.

"He didn't say." Her voice deepened. "What are you doing here? How did you get in? What do you want?"

Dix helped himself to a cigarette from a silver box on a table. He inhaled, smiling thinly.

"I want to know why you set me up for a pigeon. Or was it Diamond's idea? Don't bother to go into dramatics. You'd like to see me out of the way, safely and permanently. You knew that Al Krakow rented me to snoop. I know that you know because Krakow warned me that there was a studio leak. You were tipped in advance. So why shouldn't you play ball with the cops down here? Sertig looks like his price tag isn't too high."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" she exclaimed defensively, getting hold of herself.

CHAPTER V

A WOMAN'S SECRET PAST

HE SAW that she was going to be difficult. Cappy Tyne knew most of the questions and the majority of the answers. But she didn't know how much Dix had turned up on her in the preliminary investigations. And on that lone point, he intended to crack down hard.

"Look, sweetheart," he said ironically, "I'm harassed. I'm in line for the gas chamber after the local gendarmes work me over with a length of hose. So I'm not going to loiter around here making small talk. Either you tell me what I want to know or—"

"Or what?"

"I get Hollywood on long distance. I tell Al what he wants to know. I don't pull any punches. You're through with the bioscope henceforth and forever. So take your choice."

From the expression in her face, Dix knew she tried to decide if it were a bluff. She couldn't. She knew something about his reputation, enough to draw her crescent-shaped brows together.

"I'll have to talk to Lou first."

Dix laughed. It wasn't a pleasant-sounding laugh. Like ice being broken, brittle and abrupt.

"No, darling. The only one you'll talk to is me. And now!"

She drew a breath, and Dix knew he had won when he saw her eyes again. She arranged herself on the divan so there would be room for him beside her. Suddenly, her tenseness disappeared entirely.

"Let's have a drink," she said. "A nice cool Collins. I can always talk so much better with one. Be a dear and phone down to the bar. The service here is really wonderful. A waiter'll be around before you hang up."

* * * * *

After his talk with Cappy, Steve Dix rode out to a big house not many miles from town. It was a place of irrigated gardens, neat lawns, and the same sweet-smelling cactus that fronted Ann Madlyn's apartment building. A place of interlaced shadows, of quiet, wheeling stars, and moonlight. Dix approached it diagonally. He passed a lily pool, went up some gravel, and came finally to the porte-cochere of the house.

A three-year-old automobile parked its length a little distance away. He touched its hood. Cool. It hadn't been used for some time. He turned and went to the front door, going up some native stone steps.

A bell made a musical chime, something like the signature of a broadcasting studio. Dix stood there, his automatic back in its pigskin, shoulder holster, the plaster over his ear almost covered by his hat.

A man servant opened the door, and Dix put his foot in it, saying, "I want to see Mr. Stacey."

Over the servant's shoulder, he had a view of spiral stairs, of shadow-boxed paintings, cluttered luxury that combined Chinese Chippendale with English Sheraton and Adam in a promiscuous jumble.

"I don't know whether—" the servant began to say.

A man was coming down the stairs. A big, bulky individual with frost-silvered hair, a beak for a nose, and a wide, straight-lipped mouth. He wore a natural-colored linen suit, an offset to his tanned skin. He looked as if he had just shaved, as if a valet had just finished with him. Even his white buck shoes were immaculate.

"Who is it, Jim?" he asked in a rumbling voice that seemed to have some difficulty getting out of his throat. Then he got a direct look at Dix and snapped his fingers. "That's all, Jim."

Dix shut the door himself. "You're Stacey of course."

"Come into my study." The big man went across the hall and opened a half-shut door. "In here."

Dix accepted the invitation slowly. The room he entered was furnished with the same mismated conglomeration of periods. A black, teakwood bar hospitably glimmered with bottles and glasses in a corner.

Verne Stacey gestured toward it with a hand. Hair curled on his fingers and along the backs of his hands. A diamond ring flashed with two-carat brilliance. "Have a drink."

"Thanks, I never touch the filthy stuff." Dix went further into the room. "You know who I am?"

"Sure, the dick from L.A. I figured you'd be around before the police pick you up. Bad business for you to drop in and gun one of our leading citizens. Paul Graymar had plenty of friends. They won't like it. They won't like it at all."

"You know I didn't do it," Dix said casually, "so don't bother with that brand of malarky. As a matter of fact, you had a finger in the murder pie. Just what kind of a plum you were reaching for, I haven't decided yet, Stacey. But I'll know before I leave here tonight."

THE big man mixed himself a drink. A large shot of bourbon in a small amount of soda. No ice. He stirred it with a glass muddler and laughed.

"Sit down, Dix. Make yourself comfortable. Let's hear your gripe. How do you tie me into this?"

Stacey put all of his weight into a red-leather chair. Dix kept on his feet. "From certain documents your hired assassin didn't have time to remove from the safe in Graymar's office," Dix said. "A few notations explaining how you had tried to buy the Chantilly with no luck. Graymar wasn't any fool. When you have a gold mine, you don't give it up unless you have to."

"All right. I wanted Paul's dive," Stacey admitted. "Not so much to make dough as to keep me interested. I'm out of politics. It's all right to lie around and try to raise roses and tangelos, but it gets boring after a while. Sure, I wanted the Chantilly to play with."

"Graymar was blackmailing Cappy Tyne. I have the account book with the last payments noted." Dix kept his tone in the same casual pitch. "You're a friend of Lou Diamond, Cappy's so-called bodyguard. You knew I was propositioned by Mayor Hargen. Everybody else knew it. Why shouldn't you? And you knew that Cappy was paying Graymar through her tip-tilted nose. What did you do but join in with Diamond to knock Graymar and me off with the same stone?"

"What percentage would I get out of that?" Verne Stacey asked. "As I understand it, you were hired to run Graymar out of town."

"Yes, but that would still leave me. And I was the one about to ruin the Tyne reputation, once and for all. Al Krakow wouldn't sign her if I handed in the report on what I'd dug up on her. She must have appealed to you. And you decided to do something about it. You did."

Stacey leaned back in his chair. Outside of the soft lamplight's ring, his face didn't look so tanned. Or maybe it was the reflection of his frosted silver hair. He finished his drink slowly, musingly. He put down the glass as a knock sounded on the door.

"Come in, Lou," Stacey called quietly. "Don't reach for your rod, Mr. Dix. I shoot awfully fast and seldom miss."

A long, thin-barreled gun slid into Stacey's hand. He had made the draw with amazing speed. Dix checked his own hand halfway to his holster. He turned slightly as the door opened and Lou Diamond came in.

Cappy's bodyguard, as Hollywood

knew the boy, had a gun drooping from his fingers. Diamond pushed the study door shut with a heel and stood silently in the background, waiting.

"Now," Stacey said to Dix, "you are made of clay. You're wanted for Graymar's murder, and I caught you in here. You tried to blow me up. I beat you to the draw and shot you five times. Self-defense, I believe it's called. Where am I wrong?"

He laughed a chuckling, little, amused laugh. As it died away, Dix heard what he had kept his ears strained to hear. The crunch of synthetic-rubber tires on gravel and the low, throaty pulsations of an automobile arriving.

Diamond and Verne Stacey heard it, too. Their eyes flashed to the picture window at the study's end.

"Before I left town," Dix said carelessly, "I telephoned Miss Madlyn. I told her I was coming down here and asked her to have the mayor and a couple of other people drop in. I thought we might as well get to the bottom of this thing before the indignant gentry tripped me, presented me with a rope necktie, and strung me up in the public square. Better ask Jim to let them in."

Dix had to admire Stacey's calm. The big man shoved his gun under the waistband of his linen trousers. He signaled with a finger, and the weapon in Lou Diamond's hand disappeared.

At the study door, Stacey boomed, "Let the mayor in, Jim. Have him come in here. Get the lead out of your shoes. Don't keep His Honor waiting."

HARGEN'S false teeth clicked. His red face was redder than ever. Dix traded a nod with him and glanced at Hargen's companions. One was Sertig. The other was the bald-headed Hen Vasson.

"There's my man!" Sertig's voice had a snarl in it. "There's the party who shot Paul Graymar and kicked me in the belly!"

Hargen raised a hand and looked hard at Dix. "What's the meaning of all this? I only came down here tonight because my secretary assured me that there's some kind of a conspiracy afoot. I intend to get to the bottom of it. What's it all about?"

"The death of a gambler in this spring month, this merry month of mayhem," Dix answered whimsically. "I just accused Mr. Stacey here of being in on the rig to goat me for his benefit. He snapped back with a gun and some fancy talk about shooting me five times in self-defense."

"Why don't you grow up?" Stacey said contemptuously. "Coming around here with talk like that!"

Dix shook his head. "No good, Verne. I have the whole story. I got it direct from Cappy Tyne, and it's pure gold. Oddly, this Sertig lout has been on the level all the time. Just a dumb cluck of a cop listening to whispers in his left ear. Baldy's whisperings. By the way, Vasson, let's see your poke. I understand there's a brand-new thousand-dollar bill in it. Your payoff for killing Graymar, for stealing my gun, and planting it back in my closet. Let's take a look. Let's make it a sporting proposition. If Stacey's grand isn't in your leather, I'll turn myself in."

Vasson's face contorted. "You dirty louse!" he spat at Stacey. "You ratted on me!"

Stacey did a fast draw again. But this time it was not fast enough. Vasson had jerked a Luger out of his hip holster, and he started squeezing the trigger, hardly seeming to take aim.

The big gun jumped in his hand five times. He pumped a stream of lead into the big man, who, getting up from his chair, promptly dropped back into it. Stacey's hair-fingered hand fell away from his waistband. In slow motion, it trailed across his stomach to his side, dangling loosely. Red stains mingled into one crimson circle on the left side of his linen coat.

Lou Diamond shot at Vasson twice. His aim was excited, inaccurate. Both bullets gouged the ceiling.

Hargen, petrified, let his upper plate drop, pushed it back into place with a thumb, and scuttled for cover.

Vasson, his face still a mask of frustrated fury, brandished the Luger. "I'll croak the first guy who tries to stop me! Come on, somebody take a shot at me!"

"And I thought you had a case for me," Sertig bleated. "I believed in you, Hen."

Vasson continued to back up. He went past the chair where Verne Stacey sat collapsed with chin on his chest. He continued on to the screened, open window across from the picture window. He stood there for a minute longer, the threat in his hand ominous and deadly. With a shoulder he heaved the screen out of his way and straddled the sill.

"I'm borrowing your car, Hargen. I'll leave it on the other side of the State line."

As Vasson drew his other leg up, Dix, gliding in behind the jut of a tall bookcase, fired when the bald-headed man's knee rose another inch. Dix shot with all the skill that had made him the envy of shooting-gallery spectators whenever he went into his act.

His first shot thudded into Vasson's hunched figure. His second bored into the bald head. Vasson screamed and fell through the window.

"Now let's take a look at his wallet," Dix said, shaking the automatic, so that the last of its lazy smoke could leave the barrel before he sheathed it.

HE HAD breakfast in Ann Madlyn's dinette. A sunny place of chromium and stream-lined cabinets. The short, frilly curtains at the windows were red, with tiny, white flowers. A canary that she called "Jake" chirped in a pagoda-shaped, black cage. The smell of sizzling bacon and bubbling coffee was very pleasant.

"I owe you a lot for saving my life," Dix said slowly. "Stacey would have undoubtedly kept his word and punctured me last night. His Honor's arrival was more thrilling than the coming of the Marines. Nice work on your part."

She was dressed for the office, in cool, white sharkskin. She wore no ornaments except a freshly picked flower in her taffy-colored hair. Her eyes with the violets in their depths were crystal clear and contented. She moved, Dix observed, with all the sinuous grace of one listening to far-off music.

"Everything's pretty apparent," Ann Madlyn said, "except about Miss Tyne and why Verne Stacey would help her out of her trouble. What had you found out about her that was so nerve-shattering?"

DIX rubbed his palm across the small square of an embroidered tea napkin. He wondered if she had made it.

"I had to do a lot of digging into her past before I came up with it. She served three years in a Massachusetts jail for pushing an admirer out of a second-story window. It was quite some time ago. She had it covered pretty well, but you dig and dig, and after awhile you strike pay dirt."

"And Verne?"

"The lad she pushed the other guy out for! I had to trade with her, but it's okay." He laughed. "I agreed to withhold my report from Krakow for the information I knew she was able to give me about Graymar, who, incidentally, had picked up the window episode that she figured in back east. He was shaking her down handsomely. I didn't care about Excello Pictures last night, and about the renewal of her contract. I was only looking out for the lease on my own life."

Ann Madlyn frowned. "Then this Krakow—"

"I made the trade with Cappy," Dix said blandly, "knowing that when Graymar's murder broke, the whole story of her past would come out with it. I don't have to tell Al Krakow a word. All he has to do is spend a nickel for a newspaper and read about it. Which reminds me that you make delightful coffee, Miss Madlyn."

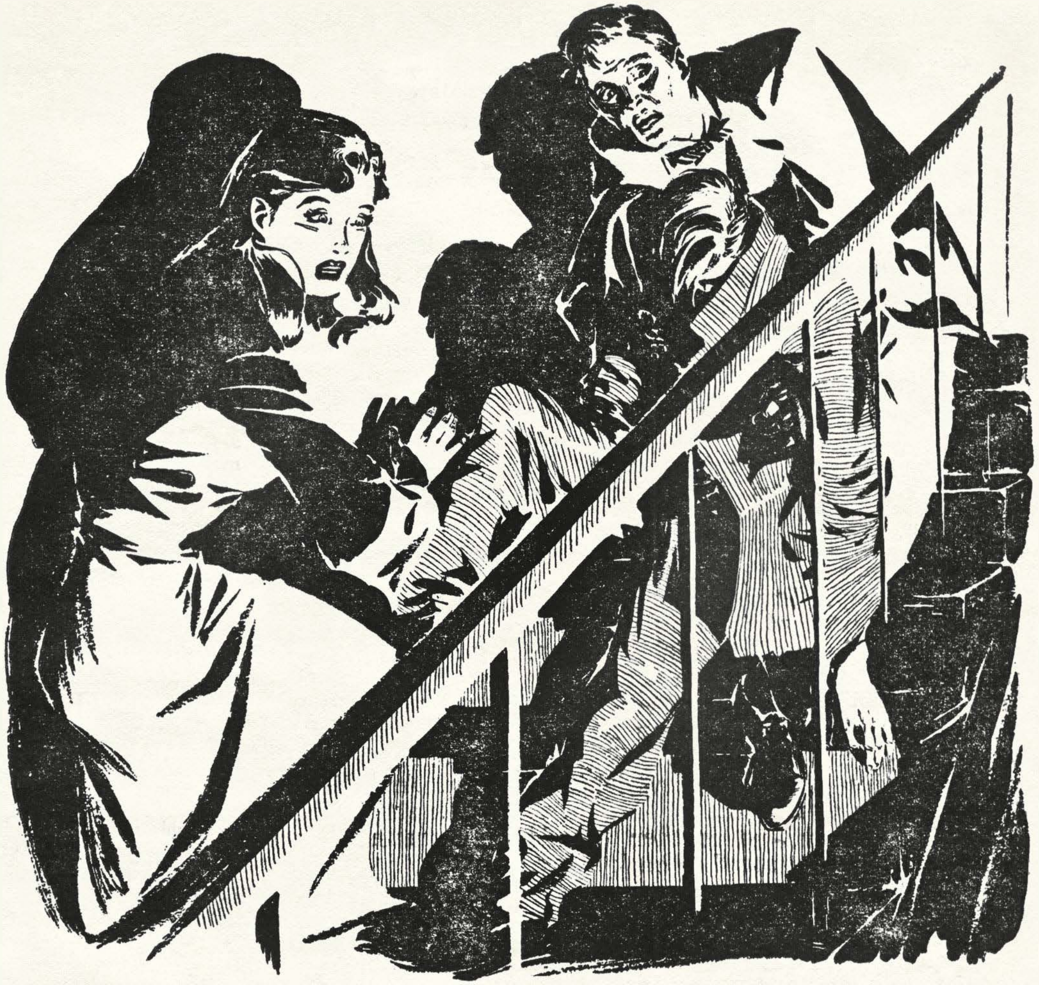
* * *

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

HIBISCUS AND HOMICIDE

An Exciting Complete Mystery Novel

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT



At that moment a door below them opened

DROP THAT CORPSE

By TOM BETTS

Here is a strange murder story, for it has a happy ending not only for the hero, but also for the man who was killed!

THE night was wet and cold. Bill Runk walked fast. Today, he'd been just another order clerk—thirty-four, shabby, broke. But tonight things were different. Tonight, there was buttoned within his coat sixty-seven hundred dollars. Not peanuts by any means.

It was an early spring night, this night of his strange turn of fortune, leafless and dark, with a steady cold downpour which should have driven everyone off the drenched city streets.

But as Bill rounded a corner near his modest apartment house, there appeared yet another man, lurching drunkenly out of the wet shadows toward him. Bill's heart commenced to pound. He speeded up his gait, and at once the other's stumbling walk ceased, and a cold voice said:

"Hold it, fellow!"

Panic shot through Bill. He leaped sideways, darted for his apartment house, made it, and slammed its door.

He was pale and shaken. He did not go to his own room on the third floor, but dashed up a single flight and flattened himself against a wall.

Below, the door grated, then steps sounded.

Sweat oozed out to mingle with the raindrops clinging to Bill's thin face. Nearby, a door was slightly ajar, indicating that its tenant was probably using the central bathroom at the end of the hallway. Impulsively, Bill entered the apartment, closing its door.

He was in a well furnished room, bright with color, a bit on the gaudy side. There was a silk covered bed, a fussy dressing table, a bureau littered with knick-knacks, and several slip-covered chairs—over one of which was draped a pair of nylons.

Bill froze, heard no further sounds from outside, and started to back away.

HE WAS about to touch the doorknob, when it swung gently in. The man who had accosted him on the street entered. His grin held no mirth. He was rangy and well-dressed and hard—the exact opposite of Bill Runk. His name was Lew Gordon, and he owned the Club Thirty. He also owned a .45 Colt which he allowed Bill to view.

"I'll take my money," he said flatly.

"Your money?" Bill looked sickly green.

"That's right, fellow. You got it at the Thirty tonight. I want it back."

"But—I won—"

"*You* won! Charley got his signals mixed, is all. Come on, give."

"You mean the game was—is—crooked?"

"Aw, rats!"

"You're a crook!" In a blaze of trembling anger, Bill Runk took an unexpected stand. "Your game's crooked! I won't—"

With a swift movement, Lew Gordon swung his heavy pistol. There was a pulpy smack. Bill Runk sagged, groaning. He lay still, blood slowly spreading over his pale face.

Gordon bent forward quickly. He lifted Bill's wallet.

"Well, I had to do it, dope," he muttered, and was gone.

Ten minutes later, a slim, dark-haired girl, a red silk wrapper tight about her, entered.

She stared. Her black eyes went wide. Her breath came fast.

"Holy Mabel!"

Jill Andrews backed away, then dropped to a chair, trembling. Why had this guy come here to her room? She recognized him vaguely as living somewhere in the building. But who had croaked him, and why?

It didn't much matter.

Whatever it was all about, it was going to be something which would be hard to explain to a guy like Macklin—and maybe to all the cops. She'd already had enough bouts with Macklin. This, if it got out, would cook her with him. And Jill liked Macklin. Actually, when she figured she was through playing around, she intended to marry the guy.

As she stared down at the gruesome sight on her floor, she knew she was through playing now. She longed for Macklin, for his big rough security, for his long arms. She was twenty-seven. She was tired. She was badly frightened.

No, you couldn't explain the presence of a murdered man in your room—even to a guy with the patience of Macklin.

The rain drummed ominously against Jill's window.

Suddenly she leaped from her chair, and, sobbing with desperation, seized Runk's shoulder and tried to drag the limp body toward her door. It was no use. She collapsed again, then straightened and stared wildly about.

Steps sounded along the hall. She listened, her breath coming hard. The steps passed her door. Her dark eyes contracted. Her red lips trembled. Cautiously, she edged her door open an inch.

"Albert!" she called softly. "Albert—is that you?"

"Oh, hello!"

Albert Pearson was a tall, stooped young man, who, since his recent arrival in the city, had begun to forget a girl in his home town, largely because he had become fascinated by Jill Andrews' more worldly ways. He now turned eagerly toward her door.

"Just getting in from a show," he explained. "Gee, I wish you could've come along."

"Albert, I need your help. Can you—will you—"

"Oh, sure, sure." He was all eager confidence. "Just say the word, Jill. You bet."

SHE let him in, then closed her door and leaned against it. When his eyes finally followed her wordless gaze to the floor, he gaped, and the color drained from his face.

"Mur-murder!"

"I guess so," agreed Jill. "I think he's a guy who lives on the third floor."

"Oh, my gosh! What—why—"

She shrugged, maintaining her control with difficulty. "All I know is I found him here, like this. You've got to help me get him out of here."

"Me?" choked Albert faintly. *"Me?"*

"I can't do it alone."

"But—but supposin' we're caught. Supposin'—"

"You won't be. Not if you help. But if you don't—"

"If I don't?" He stared at her, mouth open.

She laid a hand on his arm and looked up into his eyes. "If you don't Albert, I might scream, and I can scream awful loud. People might think—well, no matter what I'd say, it might look as though you—as though *you* did the murder."

Albert's mouth moved, but no sound came from his lips. His face was an oyster white.

"But I won't scream, Albert—honestly I won't—not if you help me."

"You hellion!" He found words at last. "What a fool I've been. What a fool I've been. What a fool."

"Shh! I've heard that before. It doesn't matter, Albert. Forget me. You've a nice girl back home. Marry her."

"You bet I will."

"But you can't, Albert—not unless you help us out of this jam."

"Us?" Albert groaned.

"We'd better start now," said Jill. "We'll carry his body up to his room if the hall's empty. That's all there is to it," she added brightly.

Jill took Runk's body by the feet, and Albert took hold by the shoulders.

"This guy's a load," he mumbled as they staggered out into the hall.

"Up to his room," said Jill, panting. "It's—not—far."

They reached the stairs, and started up, and Jill slipped. One of Runk's heels hit a step. The additional weight pulled Albert backward, and he staggered against the wall for support.

At that moment, a door below them opened. A man with iron-gray hair and a keen, rather kindly face looked out.

Two decades earlier, however, Judson Brown, under a different name and without his present cloak of respectability, had not possessed an overly kind nature. As a bootlegger in the 'Twenties, he had made a neat pile, eventually lost it. On several occasions, he had barely skirted gang warfare, and twice escaped arrest by the skin of his teeth.

But, with repeal, he had settled into a quieter life, and age and understanding seemed to combine to bring him peace and a desire to live honestly. Still, with the cost of living up, and Judson's income slipping a bit, he had of late seriously considered renewing some old contacts which he felt might prove very profitable in his present set-up.

The noise outside his door had puzzled him. But, as he looked out, he failed to notice the couple on the stairs above, with their unseemly burden, and he decided someone had possibly fallen in the central bathroom. He moved in that direction, leaving his door ajar.

At that moment, steps sounded along the hall overhead. Albert turned startled eyes on Jill. As though by common consent, they both looked down at Judson Brown's open door, and without further hesitation, they staggered inside with their burden and deposited it on the floor. A man as respectable as Mr. Brown could doubtless convince the police of his innocence easily.

But Mr. Brown, upon his return, was hardly of this opinion.

BADLY shaken, he stared at the bloody sight, and gingerly touched Runk's body with a toe of his shoe. It brought ugly recollections of the gangster-ridden 'Twenties, and likewise served to remind Mr. Brown that his own fingerprints were doubtless still on file from that era. Regardless of who committed this murder, even a casual investigation of Judson Brown would turn up these prints, and, yanking away his years of respectability, would leave him to face old charges.

It was not a pleasant prospect. Quite suddenly, Mr. Brown's respectability assumed great importance. He much preferred his present mode of living. All his longing for the old illicit prosperity had vanished. Instead, he set about devising a means of escaping this trap.

Judson Brown knew Bill Runk but casually. But he did know that he wanted Runk's body as far away as possible. Since he did not possess the strength to carry the body upstairs alone, he went to a window and took a careful, searching look along the wet, dark street outside.

As he stared with tense nerves, twin lights cut through the cold, slanting sheets of rain which fell on the dark street. A car rolled to a stop at the curb, and a big, heavily built man crawled out.

Judson's heart sent blood pounding through his veins. He grasped at the window sill for support. This was the pay-off. The man getting out of the car was a cop. Even if he was in plain clothes, you could tell that. His build, his walk, everything, gave that away. Judson Brown's previous brushes with the law had taught him much.

Obviously, then, he was framed. And it did not look as though he was going to get out of it. A wave of desperation engulfed him. For a moment, he was tempted to race from his room and flee into the cold wet shadows of the night. But as the man below crossed the walk to the door of the apartment house, a ray of hope leaped within Judson Brown's overworked heart.

He recognized the man. He was a copper, all right. A plainclothesman, but not with homicide. Judson had seen him around the apartment house at various times. His name was Macklin, Steve Macklin, and if Judson recalled rightly, he was keeping company with the Andrews girl on this same floor, which might very well account for his coming here now.

Softly, Judson Brown turned from the window and went to his door, eased it open a fraction and put his eye to the crack. Heavy steps came up the stairs. Steve Macklin's big form passed the door, while Judson Brown quaked within. Macklin continued along the hall, stopped in front of the Andrews girl's room, tried its door, and stepped inside.

And Judson Brown heaved a huge sigh of relief.

But his relief was short lived. For it suddenly occurred to him that he still had a corpse on his hands, and even if Macklin was not here to get him, some other cop would be soon. Definitely, he must get the body out of his room and as far away as possible.

Again he rushed to the window and stared out. And in a twinkling, an idea struck him. It would require speedy work, but it was an excellent idea.

MACKLIN would probably remain with the Andrews girl for at least a few minutes—long enough to allow Judson Brown time to drag the body down to the street and dump it into Macklin's car. If anybody noticed him doing it, he could pretend he was handling a drunk.

Judson Brown was quite sure Macklin had not locked his car's door. If he got the body in the back seat, Macklin might drive for miles before he noticed it. And Macklin, being a cop, would undoubtedly be above suspicion when the body was finally discovered in his car. Yes, this was certainly a perfect out for Mr. Judson Brown. But he had to act fast.

Getting his arms around the sagging form of Bill Runk, Mr. Brown tugged and strained, and finally got the body erect. Then, staggering under the load, and panting heavily, he pushed out into the hall, and went down the stairs a step at a time.

Never had Judson Brown put in such minutes of agony. Never had he exerted such superhuman effort. But fear lent strength to those efforts. He got Runk's limp body through the apartment entrance, and out into the pouring rain.

At any second, he expected to hear Macklin's harsh voice, or his heavy steps behind him. Almost anything could happen. Sweat poured down Judson Brown's worried face. Rain soaked him otherwise, as he staggered across the pavement with his grisly burden.

Desperately he tried the door of Macklin's car. It was unlocked. He got the back door open. He shoved, pushed, and dumped Runk's body into the back seat, and slammed the door on it with trembling hands.

Sobs of relief shook Judson Brown. He fled from the car. He got to his room, and closed its door. He was still clinging to its knob when he heard Macklin's heavy steps along the hall. They passed his door, and then their solid thumps were on the stairs. Judson Brown gave one more sigh, closed his eyes, and fainted away in the very spot where only minutes before the body of William Runk had lain.

As for Steve Macklin, it is probably as well for all concerned that he did not come onto Judson Brown. He was in a vile temper. Almost anything might have happened.

To begin with, Macklin, who for many months had been sweet on Jill Andrews, had lately commenced to suspect her of giving him the well known run-around. This had resulted in clashes, both inward and outward. His disposition had naturally suffered. So had his associates. So had his work. Indeed, at the moment, Macklin was in bad at headquarters. His job was, he knew, anything but secure.

And now, tonight, a well-meaning friend and brother officer had told him, as well-meaning friends and brother officers are apt to do, that he had happened by Jill Andrews' apartment house at the precise moment that a certain notorious gambler and lady chaser, Lew Gordon by name, had darted inside.

Of course, this friend had hastened to add that he did not for one moment suspect that Lew Gordon was there to call on Jill Andrews at somewhat after eleven at night. But, of course, Jill was the only good-looking girl in the whole apartment house, and by no stretch of the imagination was Lew Gordon ever known to be interested in homely girls. So if Macklin really thought Jill was two-timing him in favor of the gilded and glamorous Lew, this would be a fine chance to get the real low-down.

Macklin had not minced words. He had conked his brother officer on the head, thereby acquiring another black mark, and had jumped in his car and driven to Jill's apartment.

Not being in the upper brackets of intelligence, so to speak, and also being under considerable stress at the moment, Macklin had not assumed, when he found Jill's room unlocked and her not in it, that she was merely in the central bathroom—where indeed she was, washing away some of Bill Runk's blood from her clothing. Instead, after a few minutes wait, Macklin had decided that she had gone out with Lew, probably to his heavily protected and notorious Club Thirty.

With savage anger in his black eyes, Macklin returned to his car and drove at top speed to the old, once fashionable mansion, which was now Lew Gordon's notorious night-life and gambling den.

HE SLAMMED on his brakes, skidded briefly, and parked in a line of other cars by its entrance gate.

Macklin turned to climb from his car. There was a little light, not much, but a little from a street lamp, which sent a weak ray into the car. And Macklin, turning in the front seat, gulped and stared, and his breathing almost ceased.

In his back seat was a doubled up body, blood smeared and still, and not at all recognizable.

Macklin did not move. An icy hand crept along his spine. He felt sure the man was dead. He did not know him. He had not the slightest idea of how he happened to be there.

But he suddenly remembered his brother officer.

It was not so much his black marks, Macklin knew, and the fact that he would undoubtedly be fired if he should show up with this unaccountable corpse.

No, those things were not important. But the brother officer, whom Macklin had without ceremony knocked cold, would undoubtedly remember with some relish that Macklin had set out for Jill Andrews' apartment with murder in his eye.

Logically then, if he returned dragging a corpse, one would need to be able to add no more than two and two, to deduce that Macklin had found the man with Jill, and killed him.

All thoughts of violence suddenly fled from Steve Macklin. He was not a killer. He never wanted to be one. Even if Jill had fallen for Lew Gordon—well, that was just too bad, but Macklin certainly did not intend to go to the hot seat, just for the satisfaction of bumping his victorious rival.

He frowned, and climbed slowly from the car. The rain poured down on him unheeded. He could not for the life of him figure out a motive for planting a stiff in his car. Unless—unless—

Macklin snapped his fingers. Lew Gordon! The low-down dog probably was crazy about Jill, and wanted to get Macklin discredited, out of the way. It was an old game. Rubbing out one enemy, and planting the crime on another. Killing two birds with one stone.

Well, Macklin was smart. At least, so figured Macklin. He could and would show Mr. Lew Gordon a thing or two.

Macklin's black eyes snapped. His jaw snapped. This was down his alley. He was a man of action. None of your deep, dreamy thinkers was Macklin. Without further ado, he yanked open the back door of his car, gave a quick look up and down the rain-swept street, and proceeded to drag the hapless body of Bill Runk forth like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat.

He gripped Runk under the armpits, tugged him along, and was swallowed up by the dark shadows which clung to the side of the Club Thirty.

Near the rear of the old mansion, lights glinted beneath drawn shades. Macklin had once taken part in an unfortunate and promptly squelched raid of the Club Thirty. He knew the approximate location of Lew Gordon's fastidious office.

He found a rear door near the drawn shades, and by means of a trick he had learned from a famed burglar, whom he had once helped while away an afternoon in the local station house, Macklin unlocked the door with a penknife and dragged his grisly burden inside.

He could hear voices down a hall, and he could see lights. But Macklin knew how to be patient when he wanted to be patient. He stood silent in the shadows of the hallway. Finally, steps moved away, and the voices faded out.

Macklin stole forward, half carrying Runk's body. He reached the door of Gordon's office, gave it a cautious turn, and found it locked. Which didn't really matter, for he again performed his trick with the penknife. Then he was inside.

It was a very lovely office, very tasteful in walnut and leather, and quite immaculate, in the glow of a modernistic desk lamp. It was also deserted.

Macklin grinned. He deposited Runk's body in a Bank of England chair, and when he stood back to survey the results, he grinned even broader. Then he turned to go.

"Hold it, pal!"

The voice was hard—as hard as the look on Lew Gordon's lean, grim face.

GORDON had opened his office door gently. He had been just in time to see Macklin's broad back bent over a limp form which he, apparently, was just placing on a chair. Without a word, Gordon had drawn his blue-black pistol—and waited.

Macklin gulped. "Say—"

"You say it," said Lew Gordon coldly. "And say it quick."

He did not glance at the body. His eyes, hard and ugly, were glued on Macklin.

"Well," Macklin began.

"Talk!" snapped Gordon. "What're you trying to pull? Whose that guy?" For a second his eyes flashed toward the chair with its grotesque figure slumped on it, head tilted backward. Then his glance became a stare. "What the—"

Macklin went into action. As Gordon, suddenly recognizing Runk, wavered for a brief second, Macklin swung a heavy fist. There was a smack and a crash, and an explosive blast from the pistol. But the smack was from Macklin's blow. The crash was Gordon hitting the floor. And the pistol's report was its wild shot as it bounced out of Gordon's hand. Macklin stooped and picked up the weapon. He had plenty of time now. Gordon was out cold.

Some steps came toward the office on a run. Macklin, holding the pistol, perched on the side of Gordon's solid walnut executive's desk. A half dozen men poured into the office, but they all stopped short, their hands going up. Macklin was grinning again. He held the pistol on them with one hand, while with the other he dialed headquarters.

"Lieutenant," he said, when he finally got his call through, "I'm at the Club Thirty. There's—"

"The Club Thirty!" yelled back the lieutenant. "Macklin, you crazy fool! Don't you know better! You've cooked your goose now. You—"

"I've caught me a murderer," interrupted Macklin calmly. "I'm not pinching no club this time. It's Lew Gordon, the dog hisself."

"I'll be there," gasped the lieutenant. "Hold everything."

Ten minutes later, Lieutenant Googlin, accompanied by three members of homicide, charged into Lew Gordon's office. "Well, Macklin," said Googlin, "explain everything."

Macklin was wary. He jerked a thumb toward Lew Gordon, who was sitting up and dazedly rubbing his jaw.

"He's the one to explain."

Lew Gordon tried out his jaw tentatively, then shook his head and glared at Macklin.

"All I know is that I came into my office and caught this gorilla here with the corpse."

"You bumped this guy," said Macklin. "You might as well admit it."

"Yeah?" Gordon struggled to his feet. "Well, tell us how come you're here? How'd you get in my office? What'd you want?" He turned to Googlin. "I think this copper is a crook."

One of the homicide men who had been bending over Bill Runk's body suddenly straightened.

"Say," he cried out, "this stiff isn't a stiff at all! I mean, he's breathing! He's alive! He's—"

A groan escaped Bill Runk's bruised lips. With every eye on him, he shuddered, lifted his head, groaned again, and opened his eyes.

BILL RUNK stared at the semi-circle about him. "Where—where am I? What—what's happened?"

"Don't you know?" asked Lieutenant Googlin.

Runk groaned again, and lifted a hand gingerly to his bloody face. His eyes went from one to the other of those about him, and finally rested on Lew Gordon. "Sure, I know," he exclaimed. "That big lug tried to kill me!"

"Glory be!" murmured Macklin fervently. "See, I told you!"

"Rats!" snapped Gordon. "I've never even seen this guy before."

Bill Runk's short body was seated bolt upright now. He jabbed a trembling finger toward the gambler.

"Don't tell me that! You tried to kill me. You wanted my money. The money I won!" He felt feverishly for his wallet. "It's gone! You took it! You—"

"Now wait a minute," snarled Lew Gordon, backing away. "A guy like you never had any money."

"I had sixty-seven hundred dollars!" shouted Runk excitedly. "You stole it!"

Googlin suddenly nodded toward two of his men. They grabbed Gordon. One fished out a wallet from the gambler's inner pocket.

"Maybe this is it."

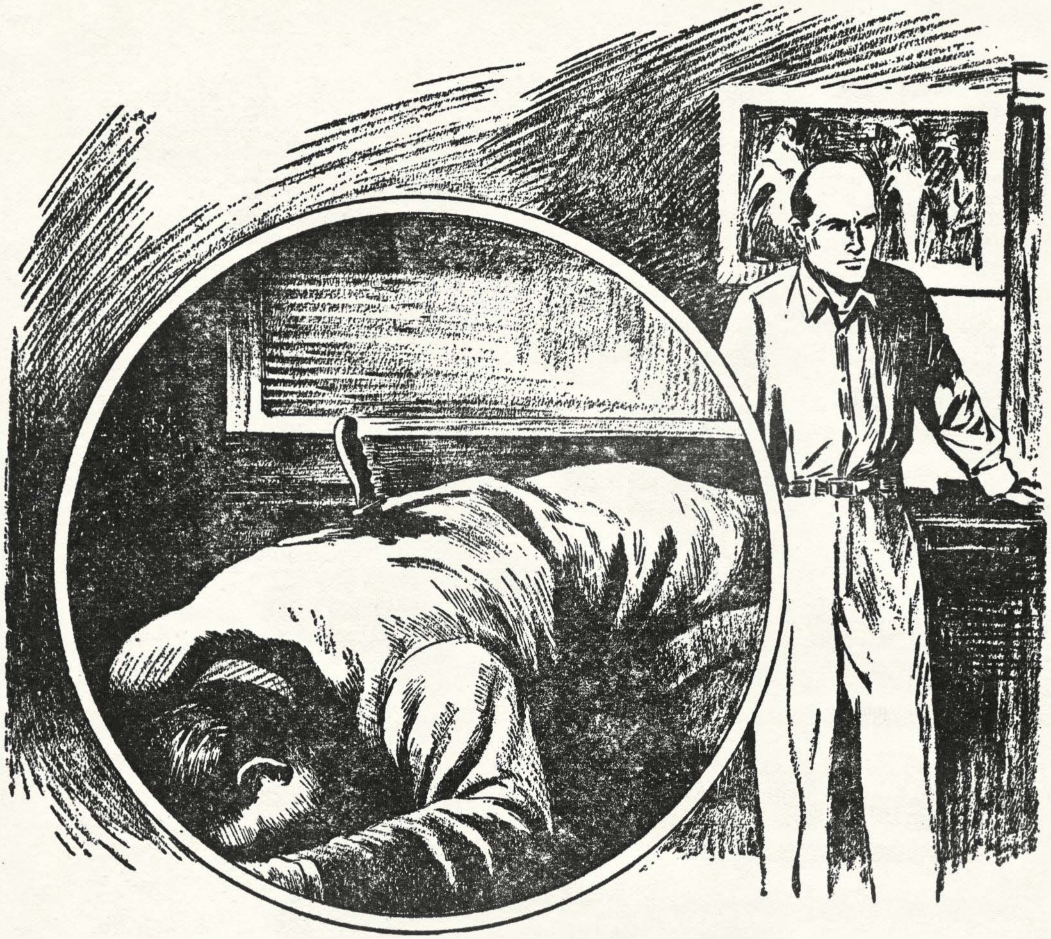
"That *is* it!" cried Bill Runk. "You bet that's it. My name's in that wallet. And so's my sixty-seven hundred bucks!"

Googlin took the wallet and looked through it, and nodded. "That's right, fellow." He turned to Macklin. "Macklin, I got to hand it to you. It's a good job. How'd you get wind of it?"

"I'll explain when I got more time," said Macklin. "It wasn't much, Lieutenant."

"It was plenty," said Googlin. "And it'll close this joint up tighter'n a drum. And Gordon with it." He looked at Bill Runk. "You're kind of smashed up, fellow. How d'you feel?"

"Me?" Bill Runk sighed happily. "I can't figure all the angles, but for a corpse, I don't feel bad at all."



When she saw the body on the

A Dwight Berke Novelet

MURDER IN

CHAPTER I

Polka-Dot Girl

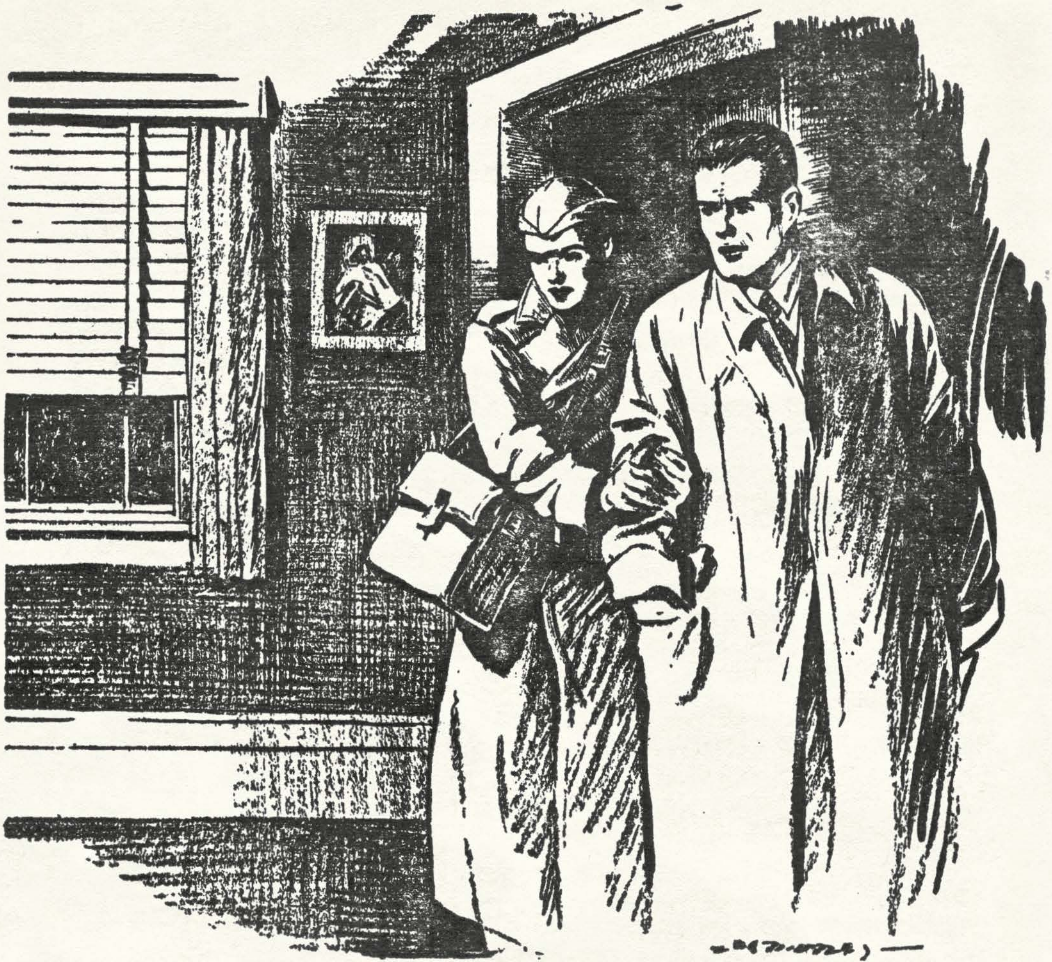
GAIL shuddered with mock dismay as the coupe narrowly missed the station wagon parked by the curb.

"You're not a Marine any more, Di," she said. "You're a reporter. You're not driving a jeep. This is the *Journal's* press car. Remember?" She grinned at her husband.

"When I chased Japs, I was always in a hurry, and a news beat is trickier than a Jap. It isn't every day that a vet like me gets a chance at an exclusive interview with a big-shot like John Cummings."

Dwight Berke pulled up near the alley that cut behind the huge pile of gray stone that was the Shull Building

Add Up a Dark Street, a Pretty Girl, and a



floor, she grabbed Di's arm

MY BONES

By CARL G. HODGES

and braked the coupe. He got out, and moved around the car and opened the door for Gail. She climbed out, her four by five camera slung over her shoulder on its shiny strap, the pockets of her trench coat lumpy with flash bulbs.

"Bazooka!" Di's exclamation burst out of him, as he saw a tall, exquisitely formed girl running hastily toward them.

The girl wore a long coat, but the fall breeze whipped it around her to reveal a torn, red, polka-dot gown that clung seductively to her figure. Then the running girl saw Gail and Di, and she stopped. An expression of fear marred her pale features. She clutched her coat around her, whirled, and began to run away, her heels clicking on the sidewalk. A shoe fell off, but she didn't stop. She ran crazily along the sidewalk and vanished around the corner.

Lost Shoe, and the Answer is Two Corpses!

Gail said, "What are you gawking at, Wolf?"

"That girl," Di said, "fear was eating in her. Her dress was torn."

"It's your combat fatigue, darling."

"Something's haywire," Di said. "Good looking gals don't tramp around on dark streets and walk right out of their shoes." He stooped and picked the spike-heeled shoe off the sidewalk. "That gal was scared to death—or I don't know fear when I see it."

FOR a moment, Gail's pert face smiled, and her voice tinkled with humor. "To think that I had to worry and fret to land you in front of a preacher," she said. "You scare other women right out of their shoes."

Di shoved his hat back off his red hair in a way he had. "It doesn't make sense," he admitted. "The Shull Building, a dark street, a beautiful girl, a forgotten shoe, and raw fear. Something's going to bust loose. I got the same feeling when we smelled out a Jap road block. Like waiting for a sniper's bullet to catch up with you."

"Nothing's going to happen down here in Printer's Row at eight o'clock at night. It's no night for murder, darling."

But Di shivered in the brisk night and pulled his topcoat collar up around his neck.

"It ought to be Indian Summer," he said, "but it's cold as death. I feel murder in my bones."

He took Gail's arm and piloted her to the gleaming revolving doors that led into the lobby of the Shull Building. He stepped in and shoved his weight against the bar. Then he yelled, "Take it easy!"

For a running man had rocketed down the marble stairway inside the lobby and blasted into the revolving door at full speed.

The bar ripped out of Di's hand, and the door spun and vomited Di and Gail, breathless, into the ornate lobby. Before they could speak, the man had vanished into the street and the flaps on the revolving door slapped noisily.

"Well!" Gail gasped. "There ought to be a law against a one-man blitz."

"I told you something was going to bust loose, Toots! That guy had a scrap of a polka-dot dress in his hand. And his pocket was loaded with other—undies."

The elevator door slid back just then and disgorged a short, pasty-faced man with pale blue eyes. Di and Gail passed him as they entered the car and Di said "Five" to the Negro operator.

They moved upward and Di said, "What goes on around here? Gals out on the street running out of their shoes and men busting through revolving doors with dresses in their pockets. What gives?"

The elevator operator's eyes rolled whitely. "Ah don't know. But that gentleman what jest left, he's been ridin' up and down to Five all night, and hangin' around thet station wagon outside the rest of the time. He looks mighty like a powerful bad man to me."

"Five?" queried Di. "That's where we're going."

The car stopped, and they got out and moved up the corridor, reading the names on the frosted doors. Gail stopped in front of a door that was partly open to reveal a darkened office. She read the legend on the glass: SHULL PUBLICATIONS—EDITORIAL.

"This is the place, I guess," she said, "but there's nobody home."

A lighted door across the corridor, marked VANCE GARRITY—*The Main Stem* was jerked open wide, and a disheveled man with a narrow, bald head and a scratched and bleeding face peered out at them. His fear-crazed eyes glimpsed Gail's camera.

"The cops must have called you the minute I called them," he said. "I'm Vance Garrity."

"The cops didn't call us," Di answered him. "We came for an interview with John Cummings."

"Come on in," Garrity said, swinging open the door with his left hand, a derisive smile on his face. "Cummings is here, but he's not talking for publication."

Gail screamed when she saw the body on the floor in front of Garrity's desk. She grabbed Di's arm.

"Take it easy, sweetheart," Di whispered hoarsely. "We came hunting a scoop, and it looks like we've found one."

DI MOVED carefully around the body. He stooped low and studied the horn-handled dagger that was buried to the hilt in the dead man's back—a dead man who was huge, with tremendous shoulders and a bull-like neck and hair-covered hands. The blue serge coat was wet with blood where the weapon had entered his body.

"You're the famous key-hole columnist, aren't you?" Di looked at Garrity. "Three hundred papers from coast to coast carry your column. Looks like you got national news right in front of your desk. Why did you kill him?"

"Wait a minute! I didn't kill the lug." Garrity's lean face worked spasmodically. "I was working on my column when he busted in through the door. I jumped up. I thought he was drunk. Then he fell flat on his face, and died. It wasn't till he fell that I saw the dagger."

Di moved to the phone to call the *Journal*. He dialed the number.

"Use that camera, Toots," he snapped at Gail while he waited. "Make it snappy."

While Gail's flash bulbs popped, Di gave his story to rewrite and promised to shoot the pix in on the double. He was putting the phone back in its cradle when footsteps hurried down the hall and Fleming Morf and Chuck Ryan came barging into Garrity's office.

Di looked up at the apple-round face of the chief of the Homicide Squad.

"Hi, Inspector," he said. "You're late."

Morf's slit eyes showed coldly. "You got a nose for murder, Berke. How'd you land here so quick?"

"We had a date with Cummings for an exclusive interview."

"Why don't you keep it? I don't need your help."

Di moved his hand toward the corpse. "That's John Cummings."

"*The* John Cummings?"

"Right. Head of Cummings Publications, world famous sport authority, donor of the Cummings Cup for big time golf, sponsor of Cummings Free Libraries all over the nation, head of the Cummings Orphan Foundation. He's given away more millions than you've messed up murder cases."

Chuck Ryan moved his oafish bulk across the room, his dull eyes on his superior.

"Shall I slug him, boss?" he asked.

Morf laughed it off, surlily. He looked at Garrity.

"Who are you?"

Garrity's face got red. "Vance Garrity," he said as if everybody in the world should know him. "Cummings came in here with that dagger in his back and died in front of my desk. I called headquarters."

"Not before you did something else. How'd your face get cut up?" Morf's cold eyes narrowed. "You and Cummings have a fight? Why'd you kill him?"

"Are you crazy?" The words blurted out of Garrity. "If I killed him, would I call the cops?"

"It has been done," said Morf. "Start talking. And you'd better make it good."

"I was working here at my desk," Garrity explained. "I heard a girl scream—but I didn't pay any attention to her."

"Let's get this straight. You heard a girl scream, but you didn't pay any attention. That don't make sense."

"In this case it does. Cummings Publishers is right across the corridor. They specialize in roto fiction and fact-detective mags. They paint their mystery covers in their own loft studio. Sometimes the models actually scream so the artist can get the right facial expression."

"Go on," prompted Morf.

"A few minutes later, I heard a girl running down the hall. Then a man. I was about to go to the door to see what was going on, when my door opened and Cummings staggered in. At first I thought he was drunk."

Garrity licked his lips and his eyes wavered unconsciously to the corpse on the floor.

"Then I saw his eyes," he went on, "and I knew he wasn't drunk. His eyes were open—but he didn't see me. He had blood on his lips. He opened his mouth like he was trying to say something. Then he fell dead."

CHAPTER II

MATCHED WEAPONS

MORF STEPPED cautiously around the body, disbelief evident in his rasping voice.

"You must think I'm a fool, Garrity," he said. "I'm not falling for that tripe. I read the papers. I know that Cummings took over all the Shull mags less than a week ago. I know that Cummings fired nearly everybody that worked on Shull's yellow magazines, including you. I know that he didn't renew the contract for that column of keyhole dirt you write. And from the looks of that face of yours, you and Cummings must have had it hot and heavy before you stuck that knife in his back."

"I'll not say another word till I talk to a lawyer." A veil of stubbornness masked Garrity's face.

"That's your privilege, pal." Di grinned at the columnist. "But as one newspaperman to another, maybe you'd do better if you'd get it off your chest. How'd your face get banged up?"

"I was coming to that, but the crazy fool wants to think I'm guilty." His face had the look of a whipped child. "As soon as I saw Cummings was dead, I went across the hall to his office. Cummings' staff has been moved in for several days, though the signs on the door haven't been changed yet. The main office was dark, but there was a light in the studio and under the door of the dressing room that the models use. I stumbled over something on the floor. It was the telephone that had been ripped off a desk. I went on back through the main office to Cummings' private office. It was very dark."

"Go on," barked Morf when Garrity paused. "Finish your fairy tale."

Garrity's eyes blazed. "I went into the office. Then something hit me. Everything went black. When I came to, I was on the floor, and my face was bleeding. I got up. I went to the dressing room. The light was still burning, but no one was there. The light was burning in the studio, too, but it was empty. Then I came back here to call the police."

"Poppycock!" said Morf.

"Shall I put the bracelets on him, boss?" Ryan put his hand in his pockets.

Di stopped him. "Inspector, I think Garrity's story is okay. We can soon check. If Cummings was bleeding—if he came here from his own office—there might be a blood trail on the floor." He pointed to a moist brown blob on the floor. "Like that."

Di moved to the door and opened it. Walking across the hall, he entered the big main office of the Cummings outfit and switched on the lights by kicking the baseboard switch with his foot. Twin rows of shiny desks marched to the end of the big room.

A telephone, its cord hanging loosely, lay on its side in a wire paper-basket. Di pointed to a red spot on the floor.

"More blood, Inspector," he said.

He moved back through the office, following similar spots on the floor until he came to a small private office. He switched on the light there to show the monstrous desk and the sumptuous furnishings. He pointed to the rough, plastered wall near the door, a few inches above the floor.

"There's more blood," he said. "That's where Garrity got his face banged up."

Garrity heaved a sigh. "That proves I was telling the truth."

"Truth, nothing!" Morf snorted. "That don't prove a thing. Maybe you and Cummings fought here in this office. Then he followed you across the hall to your office and you stabbed him there." He motioned to Ryan. "Put the cuffs on him. That fairy tale ain't quite good enough."

"Don't blow your top, Inspector," Di said, "but I think Garrity's talkin' sense. There's been funny things going on around here tonight. Garrity said he heard a girl scream and a girl and then a man run down the hall just before Cummings showed up with that knife in his back."

"Poppycock! He had to dream up something."

"But I saw a girl downstairs on the sidewalk. She was scared to death. Her polka-dot dress was torn. She ran when she saw us, and she lost her shoe and didn't even stop."

He pulled the spike-heeled shoe from his pocket and showed it to Morf. Morf grunted.

"Cinderella, huh? You want us to go all over town paging the gal that fits this shoe?"

Gail put in her two cents' worth. "A guy was following her—a guy who had some of her clothes in the pocket of his topcoat. And there was a shifty-looking man with a station wagon hanging around the building all night."

She went on to describe their arrival a few minutes earlier.

CHUCK RYAN had walked around the sumptuous desk and its massive swivel-chair. He paused before the closed doors of a ceiling-high cabinet in the corner. He pulled a door open and peered inside—and a low whistle of surprise escaped his heavy lips.

"What's wrong?" Morf strode across.

"An elevator," hissed Ryan, "a private elevator. Cummings could get to his office from downstairs without nobody knowing it."

"The cage is up," noted Morf. He turned to Garrity. "You only had to wait here in the dark for him to step out of the elevator, and then you sank that knife in his back."

Garrity's left hand took out his handkerchief and he mopped his pate. He was nervous, but he tried not to show it.

"Garrity," Morf said, "do you know how this thing works?"

"No. Only that it's a private elevator. Opens through a private door to the sidewalk. Shull and Hubbell used it, and I guess Shull gave Cummings his key when Cummings took over."

"Who's Hubbell? And why did they need a private elevator in the first place?"

"Hal Hubbell was Shull's managing editor. He was one of the few guys Cummings didn't fire. Editors always got crackpot writers and illustrators trying to buttonhole them in the halls, so I guess they figured that with the private elevator they would get away from being annoyed."

Chuck Ryan had disappeared momentarily and now he returned, carrying a ring of keys he had taken from the pocket of the dead man's trousers.

"Here's Cummings' keys, boss. Shall I see which one fits the elevator door downstairs? And here's something Cummings had clutched in his hand."

Morf looked at the scrap of thin silk, with two shiny buttons sewed in its edge.

"What the devil is it?" he asked.

"It looks like it's off of a woman's dress," Di said, grinning. "Red polka-dot."

Morf signalled to Ryan. "Ride the elevator down and see if any of Cummings' keys will unlock the downstairs door."

"Okay, boss." Ryan slipped into the cage, pushed a button and disappeared downward in darkness.

Morf tilted his head to one side. "Somebody's in the outer office."

He moved quickly to the door and glared at a man and a woman walking toward him. The man was tall, distinguished-looking, with his graying hair brushed crisply back over his temples. He carried an expensive Homburg in his hand. His clothes, well tailored and obviously expensive, fitted his lean figure to perfection.

The woman was shorter, but still queenly, and her face, under a Daché, was smooth and unlined, in spite of her gray hair that had the look of frequent beauty-shop treatment. Her eyes were soft brown and her manner was disarming.

"Who are you," Morf said, "and what are you butting in here for?"

The newcomer's eyes flickered. "I might ask you the same thing."

"We're cops," grated Morf, and slid his badge out in his palm. "There's been a murder here. Who are you?"

"Murder?" The woman's voice was a weak and frightened squeak. "Who?"

"John Cummings. Stuck in the back with a dagger."

THE woman's face went white. Her knees folded under her and she fainted so quickly that her companion leaped to ease her fall. He dropped his Homburg.

"You blundering fool!" he snapped. "This lady is Mrs. Cummings!"

"Get some water, somebody," Morf

said. Then he glanced sourly at the man in the Homburg hat. "Who are you? Why did you come here?"

"Jamison's my name. Hugh Jamison. I handle all of Cummings' legal affairs. Manage his various trust funds. We came here because Mr. Cummings requested it."

"Why?"

Jamison paused. He looked at the prostrate woman on the floor. Then he shrugged.

"I guess there's no harm in telling. We came to attend a wedding."

"A wedding? Whose wedding?"

Jamison shook his head. "I don't know."

"Did Mrs. Cummings know?"

"I don't think so."

"Did you have a key to Cummings' private elevator?" Morf asked.

"No, sir. I've never even seen the key."

"Where have you been for the last hour?"

"At my apartment. Then I drove my car to pick up Mrs. Cummings to bring her here?"

"Why didn't Cummings bring her himself?"

"He said he had earlier appointments."

"Who with?"

"How should I know?" Jamison seemed slightly nettled by the inspector's insistence. "I was only his attorney."

Chuck Ryan returned then. "Boss," he said, "the elevator's automatic. Only two stops. Ground floor and Cummings' office." He held up a brass key. "This key unlocks the street door. It's got a night latch. You can get out without a key, but not in."

Mrs. Cummings was regaining consciousness under Jamison's ministrations. Morf moved back across the room to the corridor and Di and Gail followed him.

"How you going to unravel this one, Inspector?" Di asked.

Morf shrugged. "First we got to find the girl that lost her shoe—and the guy that was following her. Maybe they're the ones that were going to get married."

"I'm not falling for that gag," Gail said. "Nobody's seen a preacher around here, have they? A preacher is just as necessary as a bride and groom."

Di whistled softly. "Homicide a la Cinderella! Boy, what a headline!" He took Gail by the arm. "Come on, Toots, we got work to do. See you later, Inspector."

Many hours later, Di was holding up the morning edition of the *Journal* so Hal Hubbell could read the headline.

POLICE SEEK CINDERELLA
IN CUMMINGS MURDER

"John Cummings was stabbed to death last night," Di explained. "You're his managing editor, so we came to you. We had a time putting the finger on you—what with no telephone listed in the directory."

Hubbell sat on the end of his spine, sleepy-eyed, his black hair tousled, and his dressing robe lumped around his spare frame in a chair in the living room of his apartment. It was mid morning and the sun streamed in the window. Empty beer bottles stood on the table, and the ash tray was loaded with cigarette and cigar butts. Beside the tray lay a horn-handled dagger.

Di was about to pick it up when Hubbell reached over and grabbed it. He squeezed a catch on the top of the handle and it flipped open and a tiny flame glowed.

"It's only a lighter," Hubbell said. "I didn't stab the boss."

CHAPTER III

A STRANGE SUSPECT

DI'S face reddened under Hubbell's glance. "The police are looking for a girl who lost her shoe, and a guy who was tailing her. Those two were in the Shull Building last night when Cummings was stabbed. Morf thinks that they are the couple who were to have been married in Cummings' office."

"So what?" Hubbell lit a cigarette with the horn dagger, and Di noted that the fingers trembled.

"I think Morf's barking up the wrong

tree. I think she was a model. She wore a red polka-dot dress."

"Red polka dot?" Hubbell sat up straight. "Say, that'd be Kac Hastings." He sank back again. "But Kac wouldn't kill nobody."

"Kac?" Gail said. "That a man or a woman?"

"Kac is a nickname. Katherine is her real name." Hubbell puffed on his cigarette nervously, thinking. Then he said, "Kac was in the Shull Building all right. I sent her."

"You?"

"Yeah. She's a model. I called her yesterday and gave her a job modelling a cover for Murder Stories. I put a red polka-dot dress in the dressing room for her to wear."

"There was a man, too, Hubbell. Who was he?"

"I've got an idea it was Pete Garcia. Pedro Garcia. He's a cover artist. But he didn't know that Kac was going to be his model. I fixed it up for him."

"What do you mean—you fixed it up?"

"Kac and Pete used to be crazy about each other. But then Kac fell for the line put out by a bald-headed wolf—and their romance was busted up. I knew they really cared, so when the cover job came up, I figured I could get Kac and Pete back together again."

"Kac didn't know that Pete was going to be the artist," Di said, "and Pete didn't know that she was going to be his model?"

"Right. I figured I'd bring them back together and the rest would take care of itself."

"It did. John Cummings is dead." Di glanced at Hubbell with a queer hunch tagging his brain. "This bald-headed wolf that Kac got sidetracked with—that wouldn't be Vance Garrity, would it?"

"How'd you know?" Hubbell looked at him oddly.

Di didn't answer the question, but he had one of his own. "Where can I find this Kac Hastings and Pete Garcia?"

Hubbell scribbled a pair of addresses on a card. "Better try the girl's place first. Pete's probably sleeping one off."

Di packed up the horn-handled dagger that concealed the lighter in its top. "This looks like a twin to the dagger that killed Cummings."

"It probably is. We got quite a few of them lying around the office. We use knives in our mystery covers quite a bit. Knives are a pretty good weapon for murder. Silent as the devil."

Di looked up Katherine Hastings first. She lived at the Berkshire Arms. Di rang her bell and he recognized the girl the moment she opened the door.

"Hello, Cinderella," Di said, and he sidled past her into the room, Gail tailing him with her camera.

Gail smiled. "Now that we've found you, Cinderella," Gail said, smiling, "how about a picture?" Her flash bulb popped and she tried to keep smiling in spite of the girl's cold stare of hate.

"There's no use wasting time," Di confronted the girl frankly. "We know you're the Cinderella girl the cops are looking for. Do you want to tell us your story so we can print the truth, or do you want Inspector Morf giving you the third degree?"

The girl's eyes showed a deep fear, but she kept her voice cold and brittle.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she insisted.

Di pointed to the *Journal* lying on the table. "You read the paper." His eyes swept over her figure. "And I wouldn't forget that shape of yours. I saw you on the sidewalk in front of the Shull Building last night right after Cummings was murdered. The cops have got a shoe to prove it. Want to try it on?"

THE door of an adjoining room jerked open and a dark skinned, black-haired man with flashing eyes strode up to Di.

"The lady don't want to be bothered," he said. "Get out, or I'll throw you out!"

"I'll lay two bucks across the board that you're Pedro Garcia," Di answered, grinning. "You're in it just as deep as your girl friend. You better talk."

Garcia flared. "Get out of here!"

"I know you were both in the Shull Building last night when Cummings was killed. If you've got nothing to hide, you can't hurt yourself by telling the truth. If you don't want to talk, I'll tell the cops what I know and they'll sweat it out of you."

The girl was wavering. Then she blurted out her story, her words tumbling over one another in her eagerness to get it out.

"I went to the studio last night to pose for a cover. I didn't know that Pedro was to be the artist. When I got there, there was a light in the studio, but I didn't go up. I went into the dressing room and put on the polka dot dress that the story called for. It was a slinky thing—two buttons held it on. I was cold, so I hung my coat across my shoulders and carried my own clothes in my hand and started out of the dressing room to go up to the studio."

Her face blanched at the horrible memory. "I turned and started to go up the stairs to the studio. A huge man came out of a dark office. His eyes were crazy eyes. He grabbed at me. He tore my dress. I screamed. And then I saw that there was a dagger in his back. I screamed, and ran. That's all I could think of."

Di turned to Garcia. "Where were you while this was going on?"

"In the studio. I heard Kac scream. I ran to the door. I saw Kac running toward the hall door and Cummings following after her. I ran down the steps. I called to her to stop."

"You didn't stop to help a dying man?"

Garcia shook his head. "No. Somehow I got the idea that the whole thing was a practical joke. We use dummy daggers and knives around the studio a lot in painting covers for mystery magazines and I really didn't think that Cummings had been stabbed. In fact, I didn't even know that the man was Cummings."

Di spotted the weakness in the story at once. "If you thought the whole thing was a practical joke, why did you bother to carry Miss Hasting's clothes with you? It looks as if you didn't want any evidence around to tie her up with the killing."

"I don't remember picking them up," Garcia said lamely. "I guess I realized that she didn't have much on except the red polka-dot dress and her coat."

Di turned his attention to the girl. "Where's the red polka-dot dress?"

"In my closet." The girl opened a door and pointed.

"Did you see Vance Garrity in the room where Cummings was?" Di asked.

"No." The word echoed from both their lips.

"Did Vance Garrity know that you would be in the building last night, Miss Hastings? With Garcia?"

"No."

"Did you see anyone else around the building at any time who acted suspiciously?"

"No." Then the girl caught her breath. "There was a man waiting on the sidewalk beside a station wagon when I arrived at the building. He avoided my eyes. He started tinkering with a door handle or something, as if he didn't want to be recognized. He was sort of—surreptitious. Looked like a gangster."

"This station wagon," said Di, "did it look to you like a private vehicle or a commercial one?"

"It had some letters on the door—like initials."

"What are they?"

"C.O.F."

Gail broke in. "Couldn't we check the license plate books at the City Hall until we hit an owner with those initials?"

"So what are we waiting for?" asked Di. "We can drop off that picture of Cinderella at the *Journal* office on the way." He grinned at Garcia, "And you'd better cook up a better story than the one you told me. It won't satisfy Morf. He'll wonder why you don't mention anything about a wedding. He thinks you're bride and groom."

DI PUNCHED the bell at the door of the Administration Building. They listened to the tinkle of the bell inside the building. Gail laughed softly.

"The elevator operator thought the man with the station wagon looked like a 'powerful bad man,' and he turns out to be a preacher. And a famous one, at that."

The door opened then, and the pasty faced man with the pale eyes whom they had seen in the lobby of the Shull Building on the previous evening, looked at them interrogatively, with no recognition in his eyes.

"Reverend Newton," Di said, "we're

from the *Journal*. Berke is my name. And this is my wife, Gail. We'd like to ask you a few questions about last night."

"What about last night?" A veil seemed to drop over the man's pale eyes, and he said, suspiciously, "What brings you here?"

"We looked through the license registration list at City Hall until we came across a station wagon listed against an owner with the initials C.O.F. When we came across the Cummings Orphan Foundation we knew you were the man we wanted. Why did you kill Cummings?"

Newton gasped, and then he smiled. "I didn't kill Mr. Cummings. He was our patron."

"Why were you hanging around the Shull Building last night? Why did you ride back and forth to the fifth floor?"

"I was supposed to pick up Mr. Cummings at the Shull Building last night."

"Why?"

"I was to perform a marriage ceremony. A secret marriage ceremony."

"Whom were you supposed to marry?"

"Mr. Cummings."

Di whistled softly. "Who to?'

"Mrs. Cummings."

"That's crazy," said Gail. "They've been married for twenty years. They have two 'teen-age children, away at school."

Newton wagged his head, and his pale eyes shifted, as he explained. "Mrs. Cummings—the present Mrs. Cummings, that is—is Cummings' second wife. His first wife supposedly lost her life in a fire at sea on a trip to the Orient with Mr. Cummings. Mr. Cummings, after a few years, remarried and he had two sons."

"That's no explanation," Di said.

"It was discovered that the first Mrs. Cummings did not die at sea," the minister went on, slowly. "She was rescued by natives on a Pacific island. She finally returned to the States, but she was mentally unsound and it was only by chance that Mr. Cummings discovered that she was still alive. Private detectives finally located her in Mexico City, but before Mr. Cummings could reach her, she passed away."

"That still doesn't make sense to me," Di insisted. "His first wife has been dead for many years. Why another marriage ceremony now?"

"Because at the time his two children were born to his present wife, his first wife was still living. In the eyes of the law, those two children are illegitimate. For purposes of his last will and testament, Mr. Cummings wanted the marriage ceremony repeated."

"Without a license?"

"The license was secured a week ago in a small village near here. I was to drive them there to perform the ceremony."

"Why did you ride up and down to the fifth floor last night without ever going to his office?" Gail asked.

"Mr. Cummings had given specific orders as to what I was to do. I did not want to displease him. He wanted everything to be very secret. I did not even know in what town the ceremony was to be performed."

"Then it's a cinch that his remarriage was not to be the subject of his story to me," Di said. "It was something else." He peered into Newton's face. "Did Cummings' lawyer know that a marriage was to be performed?"

"Yes. But he didn't know that it was Cummings. Mrs. Cummings didn't even know that."

"Do you like Mr. Jamison?"

Newton smiled. "Very much. He is a fine man. He is very particular about our fulfilling all requirements of the trust fund Mr. Cummings set up for the home. Sometimes he delays for months because we have failed to fulfill certain minor requirements. He is a very able man."

"Did you ever give Mr. Cummings any reason to distrust you?"

Reverend Newton's eyes showed more life than at any time during the interview.

"Only a mongrel would tamper with the destiny of parentless waifs," he said.

Next Issue: HOMECOMING, a Mystery Story by Carl G. Hodges

CHAPTER IV

Out of the Morgue

THEY left the orphanage and Di suggested, "How about blue points on the half shell, Toots?"

"You and your oysters. You've never found a pearl yet."

They ate at the Ship Cafe and then Di called police headquarters. When he returned to the table he was full of news and satisfaction.

"Morf had to turn Garrity loose on bail, but they put a tail on him. They found the Cinderella girl this afternoon and Morf fitted the shoe on her. They're holding both the girl and her boy friend, Garcia."

"Morf just followed our trail. That guy ought to be a process server, not a detective."

Di grinned. "Morf canvassed all the nearby towns' license bureaus. He located the clerk who made one out for John Cummings. In the village of Virden."

Gail laughed. "He'll be calling on Reverend Newton any minute now, I'll bet."

"He said the elevator boy at the Shull Building had tipped him off about a suspicious looking crook who had been hanging around the building in a station wagon."

Gail grew serious. "Here we're kidding about Morf, and we're no better off than he is. We're still groping, and there's nothing to catch on to. We've tagged everybody."

"Not everybody. I'm still not sure of Garrity. He's an expert on gathering dirt through keyholes, and it's a cinch that Cummings' cutting him off the payroll didn't make Garrity love him. Revenge is a stout motive."

"What can we do?"

"I'd like to give Garrity's office the once over."

"And I'd like to give Mrs. Cummings a going over. I think that fainting act she put on was just a little overdone. She's not as grieved about her husband's death as she let on. Drive to the *Journal* and I'll dig in the morgue and prove it to you."

Gail spent a half hour in the huge room on the top floor of the *Journal* Building where the intricately cross-indexed files of clippings and pictures of news-prominent people were kept. And, finally, she returned to Di, with both hands filled with file folders which she laid on a table with a look of triumph on her pert features.

She spread the contents of a folder on the table, and pointed to various clippings, and read the captions.

"Mrs. John Cummings and Mr. Hugh Jamison at the Ellsworth Horse Show." . . . "Mr. Hugh Jamison, accompanied by Mrs. John Cummings, at the opening of the Flamingo Track." . . . "Mrs. John Cummings and Mr. Hugh Jamison were among the celebrities present to greet Sundance, the celebrated three year old, when the top money winner of the year was flown in by plane for the twenty-one day meet at Flamingo."

"What does that prove, Toots?" Di asked, grinning.

"The old triangle, what do you suppose? She's crazy about Jamison." She pointed at the sheafs of clippings. "On every one of them she's accompanied by Jamison—not by her husband."

"Cummings was a busy guy. Maybe he didn't have time."

She was stubborn. "Maybe he had time to get sick of it. Maybe that's why he wanted another marriage ceremony. Maybe that's the story he was going to give to us."

"That won't hold logic any more than a sieve will hold water. Cummings wouldn't bend over backwards trying to keep the marriage ceremony secret, and then spill it for the papers."

Gail saw the logic, but she was still stubborn. "Women go for knives and daggers, and the lawyer is the only alibi Mrs. Cummings has got."

"She's the only alibi that Jamison's got."

"Maybe Jamison killed Cummings so he could have her," Gail put in, quickly.

"And kill the goose that layed the golden eggs? That doesn't add up." He was eager to soften the harshness of his unbelief. "But there's an angle to this mess somewhere, and if Vance Garrity knows all the dirt, the chances are he knows what the angle is. Let's go over to the Shull Building and see what we can find."

GAIL held the flashlight, while Di made a methodical search of the littered desk in Garrity's office.

"They could nab us for breaking and entering, you know," Gail said softly to her husband.

"We got in with a key, Toots, a skeleton key. Maybe it is breaking and entering, but we could argue about it." He picked up a sheet of paper turned face down on the desk, as if it had been taken out of the typewriter unfinished. "Here's something. Hold the light closer."

He whistled very softly, and pushed his hat back off his red hair.

"Listen to this, Toots. It's evidently for his column, *The Main Stem.* 'Don't believe the rumor mongers who tell you that yours truly is out on his ear when his present contract expires. Negotiations for a renewal of the contract are under way now and your correspondent holds a handful of aces.' "

"A lot could be read between those lines," Gail said.

"Right. Maybe Garrity unearthed some dirt on Cummings and meant to use it as a club to force Cummings to renew his contract."

"And Cummings refused, and they had a fight, and Garrity stuck the dagger in Cummings' back."

Di opened a drawer and came up with a card, evidently taken from a file cabinet along the wall.

"He had the dope on Cummings, all right. All of it. Listen to this: John Cummings. Born so and so. Son of so and so. Married Susan Lanphier on so and so. Married Nancy Peck Horton on so and so. Susan did not die until after marriage to Nancy. There was no divorce. Children of the second marriage are illegitimate." Di grinned in the semi-darkness. "The last line is underlined in pencil. Garrity had the dirt, all right."

A metallic click echoed through the dark room and Gail doused her flashlight. Di straightened up and whirled to face the door.

The door was open, and a huge bulk barred the doorway. Gail's light flashed on and bathed the figure in brilliant light—the ugly face, the leveled automatic.

A heavy hand pushed the light switch by the door and the room sprang into blinding brightness. Di eased a sigh of relief.

"Ryan!" he said.

Morf's oafish aide grunted. "Who'd you think it was? *Pyroman?*" His voice rasped. "When Morf told me to scram over here and keep my glimmers on Garrity's office, I thought he was crazy. But the boss is a smart detective."

"He'd be smarter to put a tail on Garrity," Di said.

"He did. A detective tailed Garrity all over town. To a bank and a typewriter store and clear out to an orphan's home."

"Garrity's got some tall explaining to do."

Ryan bowed sarcastically. "I'll escort you over to Garrity's apartment myself personal. But he ain't talkin'."

A queer thrill of apprehension nicked Di's brain and butterflies of nervousness fluttered in his stomach.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because he must of known the boss was gittin' close on his tail and his goose was cooked. He stuck a dagger in his own heart less than an hour ago!"

Garrity's apartment was on the third floor in one of the city's most fashionable sections. A cop was guarding the door when Di, Gail and Ryan got there. He opened up on Ryan's signal, and Di and Gail stepped into the living room.

Ryan grinned at his boss. "I found these nosing around Garrity's office. The dame had a flashlight, and Berke was going through Garrity's papers."

Morf moved his hand toward the table that held a brand-new, shiny typewriter. Garrity's body was slumped over it, a dagger buried in his left side, his right hand still clasped around the hilt.

"Garrity made it simple for us," he said.

"Who found him, Inspector?" Di asked.

"One of my men. Garrity ditched him for a while, and my man came back to the apartment to pick up the trail.

He tried the door, it was open, so he walked in and found Garrity."

Di moved around the room, his keen eyes searching. He stopped in the corner, where a typewriter of an old-fashioned vintage rested on the floor.

"Too bad Garrity didn't live long enough to enjoy his new machine," he remarked.

He picked up a packet of matches lying on the table near the corpse. He opened the packet and then replaced it. He glanced downward into the metal wastebasket at the end of the table. Then he looked at Morf.

"Did you go through his pockets?" he asked.

The door opened suddenly and the cop interrupted. "Is it okay for Hugh Jamison to come in?"

BUT Cummings' urbane, distinguished lawyer didn't wait for permission. He walked into the room.

"What you barging in here for?" Morf growled.

"I live in five-o-three, Inspector. I saw the policeman at the door. I wondered—" His eyes saw the corpse and his eyes reflected shock.

"There's the stuff we took off Garrity's body," Morf told Di, ignoring Jamison. "Keys, wallet, and so forth."

Di picked up a key chain that held a dozen keys, and fingered them. Jamison was watching him, his eyes gleaming with interest.

"Garrity lied about not having a key to Cummings' elevator," the lawyer said. He pointed. "That's it."

Di walked to the table, leaned over, and turned the platen-knob on the typewriter slowly as he peered at it. Then he moved to Morf's side and his words exploded in the room.

"Garrity didn't kill himself!" he announced. "And he didn't kill Cummings!"

"Huh?" Morf's mouth dropped open as the impact hit his brain.

"Garrity was left-handed," Di said. "Would he forget the habit of a lifetime to stab himself with his right hand?"

Morf's breath eased out. "It ain't likely."

Di pointed to the wastebasket. "Somebody burned a sheet of typing paper in that basket not long ago. It wasn't Garrity, because the packet of matches is full and Garrity didn't carry a lighter."

"If Garrity didn't burn the paper," Morf said, "who in the devil did?"

Di turned around to face the lawyer. "Hugh Jamison!"

"Jamison?" Morf grunted. "Are you crazy?"

Di pointed to Garrity's effects. "Jamison identified the key to Cummings' private elevator—in spite of the fact that last night he denied ever having seen one. He recognized the key—because he used it to get to Cummings' office the night he killed Cummings and slugged Garrity, and because he put it on Garrity's key ring after he killed Garrity, to help pile up evidence against Garrity and make his death look like suicide."

Jamison was scornful. "Mr. Cummings was my best client."

"He was. Until he discovered that you'd embezzled funds from the Cummings Orphan Foundation, and lost the dough on race-track bets." He grinned at Gail. "You gave me the idea, Toots, when you dug all those pictures out of the *Journal* morgue. And that's the scoop that Cummings wanted to give me last night."

Jamison's scorn was turning to rage. His face was mottled. Di grinned at him.

"You came here tonight to kill Garrity," Di said. "He was typing the story that would send you to the electric chair. In fact, he'd completed a pargraph that named you as Cummings' slayer. After you killed him, you took the paper out of the typewriter and burned it in the wastebasket."

Jamison snarled. "So what?"

"But you forgot—or you didn't know—that the new platen on a new typewriter will hold a faint impression for several hours."

"Well, I'll be darned!" Morf said.

A snub-nosed automatic suddenly jumped into Jamison's hand. His suavity, his urbanity, had vanished, and his face was stamped with the cold fury of homicidal frenzy. His lips curled high over his teeth in an ugly snarl. His weapon centered on Morf.

"You dumb cluck! If this nosey reporter hadn't butted in, you'd have tagged Garrity with Cummings' murder, just as I planned. You can save the chair for some other sucker. I'm getting out of here, and if you make one move to stop me, I'll blast you!"

He moved backward over the Oriental rug to the door, his gun level, his eyes cold with a killer's glint.

Di moved his leg sideways and shoved Garrity's discarded typewriter along the polished floor behind Jamison. A bullet sang over Di's head and smashed into the wall. But Di stooped and his hands clutched the end of the Oriental rug on which the lawyer stood. He jerked with all his strength.

Jamison was alert to the movement, and jumped back cagily. But his feet stumbled over the typewriter and he crashed to the floor. A bullet zipped wildly into the ceiling.

Di leaped forward and crushed the gun out of Jamison's hand with a grinding heel. Jamison squirmed, howling with pain. He scrambled to his feet, his lips cursing, his face livid.

Di hit him—squarely on the point of the jaw.

Jamison went down under the blow as a blinding light flared.

Gail grinned as Di whirled around. She patted her four by five camera.

"I got it for posterity, honey," she said. "I hope you're photogenic."

The cops took Jamison away. Morf walked over to Garrity's new typewriter and stared at the black platen.

"You got better eyes than I have, Berke," he said. "I can't see anything on it."

"There's nothing on it, Inspector. I was just bluffing. I read that in a book somewhere, and I decided to try it on Jamison. We had to think up some way of making him confess, didn't we?"

Morf grinned. "Yes, *we* did."

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THIS WILL KILL YOU

A Johnny Castle Novelet by C. S. MONTANYE

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Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

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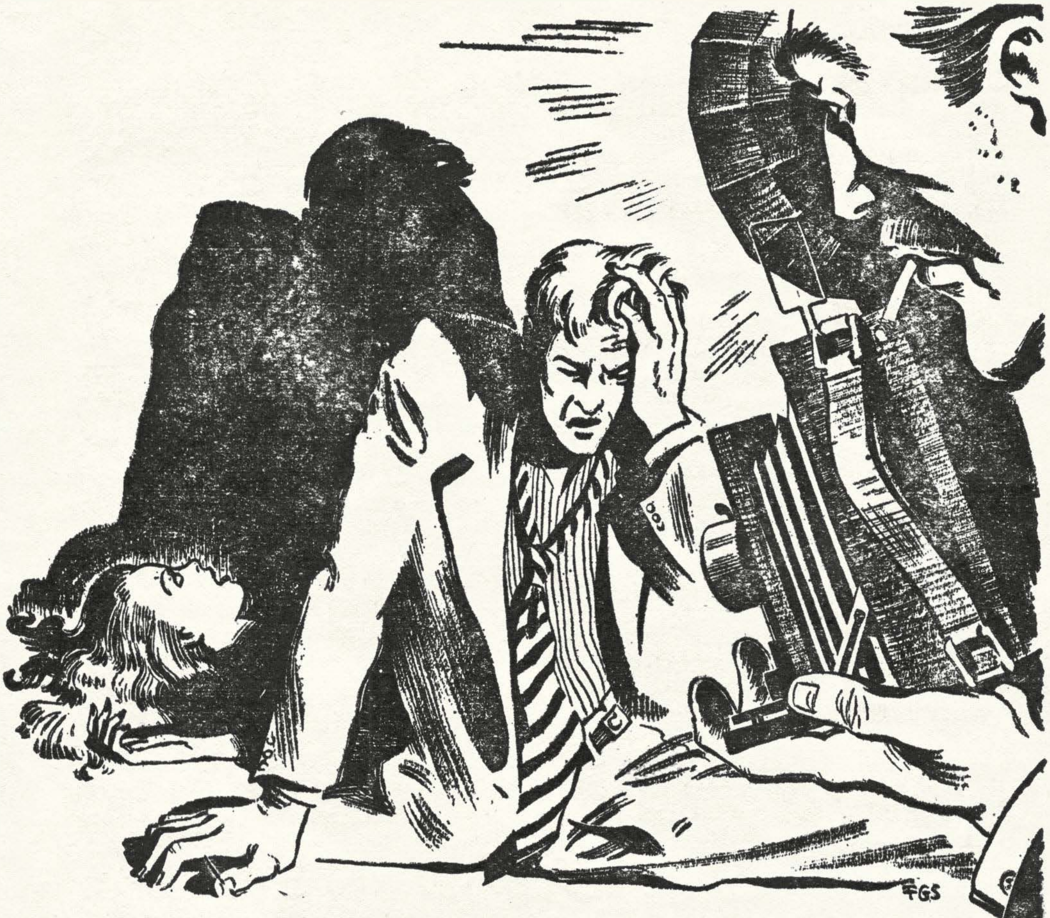


I was sick to my stomach, and conscious of the stench of whisky

A SHORT BIER FOR BERTHA

By A. J. COLLINS

When Bill Coles lands a job as telephone salesman, he talks himself into a corpse—as his first day's pay!

THE tall, thin man behind the desk was the sleekest individual I'd ever met. He glanced at the memo the office girl had given him, and looked up again at me.

"Have you ever had any experience as a telephone salesman?" he asked. Suspicion was in his sharp, black eyes and his long, thin fingers were a fishy white. They'd never seen hard work.

"No," I said pleasantly. "I saw your ad in the paper and I thought I'd like the job." I grinned. "The ad says it pays good money."

"Hmmm," he said.

According to the pint-sized young woman in the outer office, he was Mr. Stark. Something about his appearance went along with the name. He leaned back in his swivel now and made tents with his fingers. He looked searchingly at me.

"We are in a peculiar business," he began, "a business condemned and maligned by the Chamber of Commerce and all the other busy-body organizations. Actually, what we do is solicit funds over the telephone for various charitable organizations who hire us because they know we are experts at the job. There is nothing wrong with the deal. As far as you're concerned, you call people on the telephone and tell them that we are sponsoring a dance and vaudeville entertainment here in Montville. Then, you ask them to buy tickets. The tickets are two dollars and forty cents apiece. Out of that you get fifty cents, or twenty-five per cent. The forty cents is tax. We have the tickets delivered and collected for."

"But," I protested, "I wouldn't know how to go about such a thing. I wouldn't know what to say to people."

"You will," he promised drily. He stood up and opened the door to the outer office. "Bertha," he called.

IMMEDIATELY, the diminutive girl, who was apparently Stark's secretary, came in. She gave me a sweet smile and looked at her cadaverous employer for instructions.

"Bertha," Stark said, "this is Bill Coles. He's going to work for us. He's lived here in Montville nearly all his life and is just out of the Army. I want you to break him in right."

Bertha's smile widened. "It will be a pleasure," she said in a tone that was almost a purr.

I had an idea it would be a thrilling experience for me, too, for Bertha, despite her tiny stature, was exquisitely formed and exceedingly beautiful. Standing there, my eyes paid her silent tribute, and I thought I caught a flicker of annoyance in Stark's face.

When I turned away from Bertha, Stark's hollow-cheeked face exhibited bland good nature. He waved the two of us out of his office. Bertha, a little unnecessarily, took my hand and led me into her own private office, a tiny cubicle, off to the left of the big reception room.

"Sit down, Bill," Bertha said, "and let's get acquainted."

That was my idea exactly. I eased my big, well fed frame into one of the spindly chairs, a little gingerly.

"I think I'd better give you a spiel sheet first," Bertha said, "and let you read it over to yourself. Then you can read it out loud and we'll see how you sound."

The spiel sheet, as she called it, was two typewritten sheets pasted one below the other, so that the spieler could read the whole thing without turning a page.

Reading it, I discovered that I was Mr. Blank, and that I had been asked to call the party I was talking to by the members of the committee of the Montville Cancer League. The league was sponsoring a benefit entertainment and dance at the high school on a date that was three weeks away. I was calling to ask if my listener would support the league's drive for funds by purchasing tickets.

On the lower sheet were imaginary conversations, bracketed parenthetically, and labeled 'comebacks'. These were the things I was supposed to say to people who refused to take tickets. They hadn't missed a trick. It was all there. All I had to do was read off what was on the sheet and I'd make money. Bertha had me read the script a couple of times for her and I was apparently a success.

"Bill," she said enthusiastically, "that's marvelous."

"When do I start?" I inquired.

"It's lunch time now," Bertha said musingly, glancing at the rose-gold watch on her dainty wrist. "I'll take you to lunch and explain more fully. Then, this afternoon, we'll get you started."

Stark's office was in the town's biggest hotel. He had a suite of three rooms, as far as I could learn. We took the elevator downstairs and had lunch in the grill room.

Bertha chattered away, telling me all about the peculiar business I was in now. I let her talk. There was something very attractive about the way her soft red lips looked in motion. She guessed that I was deeply impressed by her loveliness. At one point, she reached across the table and covered my fingers with her small hand.

"I like you, Bill," she said very gently. "I hope you like working with us."

"I'm sure I will," I said stiltedly.

OTHER men were in the office when we got back. One of them was John Wallace, the sales manager for Stark's telephone crew. He was a big, beefy man who looked more like a detective than a sales manager. He had a gold tooth in the middle of his lower row of teeth. The thing sparkled as he talked and gave a deceptive cast to his whole appearance.

He was the booming type. He put a fatherly arm across my shoulders and welcomed me to the fold.

"You're going to make a lot of money, Bill," he told me. "You've got a good job." The gold tooth sparkled at me, the highlight of his smile.

Stark came out of his inner sanctum. There was another man with him, a slightly-built little man with big, thick lensed glasses.

Stark introduced him as Walter Roberts, his star salesman. The star salesman moved close to me, and, pushing his face almost into mine, peered at me, like a jeweler examining a suspicious gem.

"Pleasedtomeetcha," Roberts said tonelessly.

I stifled a laugh and backed away from him. Wallace, the big sales manager, laughed loudly.

"Roberts is a little unusual," he said amiably. "You'll get to know him in time. But now you'd better come along with me. I'm going to put you to work."

Roberts, his eyes huge behind the thick lenses, glanced at me and then at Wallace.

"He don't get any taps," he snarled truculently.

"Of course not," Wallace said.

I didn't know what they were talking about. Bertha moved close to Stark, standing in the doorway of his private office, maintaining a deep, thoughtful silence. At that point, I got the distinct impression that there was dissension in the ranks of Stark's organization. He saw me looking at him, and dreamed up a sweet phony smile for my benefit.

I went along with Wallace and Roberts. They had a car at the curb. We rode a few blocks and drew up in front of a print shop. The crew's headquarters was upstairs. They had a four room apartment set up as a boiler shop.

The small room at the head of the stairs was where Wallace had his office. A doorway from the office led into what had probably once been a living and dining room.

A white pine table, unpainted, stretched the entire length of the two rooms. There were about ten men, five on each side, spread along the table. Each man had a telephone headset and a chest transmitter and they were constantly calling telephone numbers, from lists in front of them. A huge pile of lists, similar to those they were using, was on Wallace's desk, so I guessed that Bertha made them up.

Later, I found out that this was so. She would take a page of names from the telephone book, count fifty of them and cut the list off at that point. The fifty names were pasted on a white sheet of typewriter paper and doled out. When a salesman had exhausted his group of names, he had only to ask for another one.

There were two vacant positions at the long table. One of them belonged to Roberts, the star salesman. The other, of course, became mine.

I was put to work immediately. Wallace had a set of telephone keys in his office that made it possible for him to listen in on any line. He listened to me for a while and then turned me loose.

During the afternoon, despite Roberts' lowering face across the table from me, I sold forty tickets.

WE KEPT telephoning right up until ten o'clock at night. I had expected that my day's work would be finished by six, but Wallace explained that the boys made most of their money after the supper hour.

"You see," he explained patiently, "during the day you talk to women. A great many of them will not buy without asking their husbands, and then you build up a pile of what we term, 'call backs'. They never pay off. But at night the husbands are home and you talk to them. Then it's either yes or no."

I could see his point, and I sold another twenty tickets between six and ten, which meant that I had made thirty dollars for a day's pay.

I began to enjoy my work. A few of my calls had been contacted previously. It was a case of duplication I guessed, but still I'd done very well.

Roberts, the star salesman, had only sold about forty dollars worth of stuff all day and he was angered by my showing. He was growling about taps, insisting that I had been given them. I didn't know what he was talking about, but I intended to ask Bertha when next I saw her.

She and her emaciated employer came to our place just at quitting time. Stark and Bertha took over Wallace's office and the men trooped in to be paid. The tickets sold the previous day had been delivered and paid for, and the commissions were being paid.

After the other men went home, I went into the office to be congratulated. Stark didn't pat me on the head, but I was afraid he was going to. Roberts had been quarreling with Stark, and sat hunched in a wooden chair, glowering at me. His eyes behind the thick lenses were blazing.

Stark and Roberts explained to me that I would draw some pay the following night. That was all right with me. I went downstairs and started waiting for a bus to take me back to my furnished room.

While it was true that I had lived in Montville all my life, I had no one left now, and I lived alone. I had been waiting for less than five minutes when Bertha came downstairs and started to get into a small coupe a few feet away from me. She pulled over to me.

"Where are you going, Bill?" she asked.

She was smiling and her pretty eyes were dancing. She offered to give me a lift and I got into the coupe with her.

"Do we have to go home?" I asked her, after she'd got the car in motion. She grinned and shook her head.

"No. Where shall we go? Do you know how to dance?"

"Anywhere and yes," I said.

Bertha knew her way around in Montville. She drove out onto the highway and we went to the Green Parrot, a swanky roadhouse. There was a name band and a fair-sized dance floor.

Bertha's head came only to my chest, and I wondered if we wouldn't look a little foolish on the dance floor. But after we'd danced a couple of numbers I forgot all about it. Eventually, we sat quietly at our table, sipping our drinks and just watching the crowd on the dance floor.

"Listen," I said, as a thought occurred to me, "what are taps?" Bertha laughed.

"You're catching on fast, aren't you?"

"I don't know, but I just wondered what they are."

"It's a long story," Bertha said.

"Well, I got time."

THE waiter came over, crowding us a little. Bertha smiled at him.

"I'll take a short beer," she said sweetly.

I took one, too. She didn't like the way the house was pushing drinks.

"Bill," Bertha said gently, when the waiter had gone his way, "you're in a dirty business. A racket. You're calling people on the telephone, selling them tickets for a big show to raise money for a cancer fund. Now most people fear cancer, and they will contribute to almost anything that threatens to fight cancer. Stark is nothing but a racketeer. Who do you suppose is the Montville Cancer League?"

"Stark," I said swiftly, beginning to understand.

"Exactly," Bertha said. "You see, he established an office here in Montville a few years ago, with that name on the office door. That's so he can come back here every year and work the town. But there is never anybody there. And if the Chamber of Commerce gets wise to what he's doing, they'll run all of us out of town. Not only that, but I have a hunch that Stark is planning a dark house."

"What is a dark house?" I queried, beginning to sound like a very good straight-man.

"That's where a promoter comes into town, schedules a show, and telephones everybody who might buy a ticket. When he's collected, he gets out of town.

And there never is any show."

"Why should he do that this year?"

"Because he's given up his lease on the Montville Cancer League's office," Bertha said. Her eyes were huge and we stared at each other, while we worried about jail.

"What about the police? Won't they get after him?"

"Yes," Bertha said. "Probably. But what can they do after the bird has flown?"

"And now about taps," I persisted.

Bertha smiled. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this, but you'd find out about it sooner or later anyway. Taps and a sucker list are about the same. In each and every town there are a certain number of people who will buy tickets over the telephone, no matter what the thing is for. All the promoters have a list of their names, and when a promoter is going to work a town, he gives his best salesman the taps, so that the hotshot will make a good commission and get all the big money in a hurry. That way, if the pressure is put on, and the promoter is forced out of town, he already has the cream, anyway."

"I see," I said slowly. Bertha's tiny hand touched mine.

"I'm not so sure. You see, a large portion of those taps contains the names of men who will contribute thousands of dollars to such a campaign as you're working on now. We ask them to be patrons, with their names in the program, but it's still a quick grab at easy dough. Half of Stark's organizations, that he works for, don't even exist. He'll clear fifty thousand dollars on this little grab and then move on to another town."

"What about me?"

"That's for you to decide," Bertha announced dully. "You can depend on it, Stark will want you to go along. You just happen to be good at this business, and you have a marvelous telephone voice."

BERTHA'S about face, where I was concerned, bothered me. I asked her about it.

"I did a little checking up on William Coles," she said cryptically.

I didn't know what she meant so I just let it go. We had half a dozen short beers, at fifty cents apiece, and I began to wonder if maybe Stark wasn't in the wrong racket after all. We left the Green Parrot just before closing time. Bertha drove to her apartment.

"Would you like to come up for a few minutes?" she said. "I have some beer on ice, and we can have a glass or two."

Much as I wanted to, I decided I'd better not. I was thinking about the long walk home. At this hour there'd be no busses. Bertha must have read my mind.

"I'm going to let you take my car," she revealed. "Then you can stop by for me in the morning. You can have coffee with me if you like."

"Why are you being so nice to me?" I inquired, puzzled by the way she'd developed such an interest in me in so short a time.

Her eyes were honest when she answered me. "I like you, Bill. And I think you're a swell guy." She got out. "I don't have any cigarettes at all. Would you drive a few blocks and see if you can find a diner open or something and get some? I'll pour the beer for us. The front door is open and you can just walk right up. It's the second floor."

She moved off into the darkness and I watched her little figure as she climbed the short, stone steps. She went inside, and I started cruising through the deserted streets. I found a diner just a few blocks away. I got the cigarettes and had a hamburger sandwich and some coffee. I felt a little guilty about that, because I thought Bertha might have been hungry too.

I drove the small coupe back to the apartment house slowly. There were a lot of questions buzzing around in my mind. I was convinced that Bertha was a swell girl. She kept telling me what a nasty racket I was in now. Why was she in it? How long had she been in it? And what was I going to do about it?

There was just one way to get answers. I parked the car and climbed the wooden stairway to the second floor. A dim bulb burned at the head of the stairs and shed very little light upon the doors along the corridor. I bent a little to glance at the name plate on Bertha's door and something hit me on top of the head.

A blinding flash of red streaked through my head and straightened out into a broad morass of deep black—beckoning, beckoning. . . .

A brilliant light flared momentarily and I wondered vaguely what I was doing in an atom bomb explosion. I thought fleetingly of the goats they tested the atomic explosion on. But I wasn't a goat. Why should I be experimented upon? I got mad about the thing. And then the sharp agonizing pain in my head made itself felt.

"He's coming out of it now," a deep male voice announced, disgustedly.

Reluctantly, I sat up and looked around me. The bright, eye-searing light had been caused by a photographer's flash bulb. But how could I get mixed up in that?

I WAS sick to my stomach, and overwhelmingly conscious of the nauseating stench of raw whisky. Sanity filtered back into my brain slowly, and I was taking stock as my recuperation progressed. There were quite a few people here, and I'd never been in the room before. I recognized some of the men. They were homicide detectives.

And then I snapped out of it fast. My clothes were almost saturated with whisky and I was palpably and probably drunk. Someone had done an excellent job of setting a stage.

"What happened?" I inquired huskily.

A thin man, with deep calipers above his mouth, and a dapper appearance, moved close to me. He didn't help me, waiting patiently for me to stand up. He wore a soft, felt hat and a gray topcoat that was a little too long for him. His gray eyes were ugly.

"You tell us," he ordered tersely.

I twisted my head to look around me and became sorry I had done it. The pains that shot through my tortured cranium were bad enough, but the unpleasant sight I observed was even worse.

Bertha was lying upon the floor, very still and very dead. There was a small round hole in the right side of her throat. A thin trickle of red blood had rolled down the back of her neck and spread out thinly upon the rug.

Even as I considered all these things, the police were going about their tasks with a quiet efficiency that was terrifying. The thin, dapper detective, who was waiting for my story, seemed to be in charge.

"Somebody hit me," I said, stupidly.

"Yeah," the detective smirked, "John Barleycorn."

"No," I protested weakly, "I'm not drunk. I'm trying to find out what this is all about."

"What a coincidence," the detective said. "So am I."

A uniformed patrolman, who completely dwarfed my own six feet of height, whispered in the detective's ear. They came to immediate agreement upon some point.

"Let's have your fingerprints," the big patrolman said, moving over to me and grasping my wrist purposefully.

"What for?" I said, a little wildly.

I got a big, bright grin from both of them. The detective explained.

"We want to check with the murder gun. It's customary, you know. We want to be able to prove you killed her."

"But I didn't!" The words came out sharply, protestingly. It was almost a scream.

Another uniformed patrolman yelled from the other end of the room.

"Lieutenant Ross, will you come over here, please?"

The detective smiled ghoulishly at me and strode over to Bertha's corpse. The tall patrolman inked my fingers and rolled them on a white, printed form.

I went through the business apathetically. I was in a bad mess and I knew it. My stomach was still queasy and my head had a peculiar tendency toward spinning.

Ross, the detective, was in earnest conversation with a squat, bald-headed little man. This was the police doctor. The physician had a big pouch, and his dark brown suit was pathetically threadbare. The two men glanced in my direction from time to time as their confabulation progressed.

The fingerprinting business was concluded and I wiped my inky fingertips on my suit, uncaring.

LIEUTENANT ROSS came back to me. The calipers deepened as he smiled winningly at me.

"Did you ever see this before?" he asked mildly.

He had the murder gun in his hands, a white handkerchief around it. He spread the folds, and despair, sudden and sharp, swept over me as I recognized my own gun. The last time I had seen it, it was in my bureau drawer.

I gulped, unable to speak. Grinning, Ross turned the gun over to the exceptionally tall patrolman. He immediately began a comparison of the fingerprints.

I knew before the result was announced that my prints would be on the gun. The killer was too clever to overlook a bet like that. Ross sat down and pulled me to a seat beside him on the room's threadbare sofa.

"Now," he purred, pleasantly, "let's talk this all over. Why did you kill her and when did it happen? You know, tell us all the details. I like to listen to stories."

I sighed. It was pointless, I knew, but I told him I hadn't killed Bertha. Then, chronologically, I told him all about my association with her and Stark. The whole business.

The little, pouched doctor started to go out the door. Ross called to him.

"Doc," he said, "give this guy a going over. I want to know whether or not he's drunk."

The smell of whisky was still strong in the room and I wasn't sure I'd pass the test. But I did. I walked a straight line for the medical man. I held my fingertips extended, brought them together with my eyes closed and a few other similar tests. I even had to say, "This is better than rubber baby buggy bumpers." Think it's easy? Try it.

"He's perfectly sober," the doctor announced finally.

He went his way, and Ross called to the tall fingerprint expert. His name, paradoxically enough, was Tiny. He became a little more human for me when I noticed that his big shoes squeaked loudly with every move he made.

"Test this guy's hands for nitrates," Ross said. "You got the stuff with you?"

Tiny grinned, and I liked him. He was just an overgrown youngster. He pulled equipment out of a square black suitcase and did things to my hands.

"Nope," he told Ross. "Unless he wore gloves, this guy didn't fire no gun. Not lately anyway."

"We searched you," Ross announced musingly. "You have no gloves, and we went over this place with a fine-toothed comb. No gloves."

"I didn't kill her." I insisted, belatedly. "It happened just exactly as I told you."

"Didn't you wonder why the girl talked so much to you?" Ross queried, smiling.

I nodded. I had wondered about that.

"Will Coles is a detective on the prosecutor's staff," Ross went on. "The girl obviously hated this man she worked for and the work he was doing. She thought you were Will Coles."

"But why did she work for him if she hated him so much?"

Ross had the answer to that, too. He pulled a small square book out of his topcoat pocket. A diary.

"She has it down here," he said dully. "Her mother died from cancer. And she had tried to get Stark to help. He laughed at her. She was out to get him."

"Well, maybe he killed her," I said eagerly.

"We'll see," Ross said. "The boys are out picking him up now. He and his henchmen should be here any minute. In addition, there's a cop at your rooming house quizzing your landlady. Somebody went there and got your gun."

"But it's four o'clock in the morning," I said, appalled. "My landlady will raise the devil."

"Get yourself another room," Ross said, blithely.

HE GOT up and went back to the men who were swiftly and methodically tearing the apartment to pieces. The police were searching for something, but I didn't know what.

Stark, Wallace and the star salesman, Roberts, came in, heavily guarded by six patrolmen. Ross observed their arrival and his face grew harsh.

Stark looked like a man who had been awakened from a sound sleep and resented it intensely. He glared at me.

"I'm very sorry to hear of Bertha's

death," he told Ross. "But I had nothing to do with it. It would seem to me that you have your man here."

He flicked a glance at me. He was every inch the suave, urbane executive, too good to be touched by murder.

"We're not so sure," Ross said. "Now that you three are here, I'm sure you'll be able to tell us where you were when the girl was killed."

Wallace, Stark's sales manager, laughed and the gold tooth glistened brightly. He looked as if he had a small bright bulb in his mouth. He was at ease, except for a slight pallor.

Roberts gazed around a little helplessly. He moved close to Ross, leaned against the detective's chest and peered into his face. Ross pushed him away.

"Is this guy bats?" he snarled. "Keep him away from me."

He herded all of us into an unused corner of the room. He sat down upon one end of a drop leaf table and folded his arms across his chest.

"One of you birds killed this girl, I'm sure," he said bluntly. "Now we're going to find out."

"You're not pinning it on me," Stark said. "I was in my bed and sound asleep when all this happened."

"How do you know?" Ross demanded.

"I went to bed early," Stark said.

"Me too," said Wallace. He treated the thing as a joke.

Roberts, his eyes ghastly behind the heavy lenses, didn't say anything. He seemed to be peering unsuccessfully at the activity of the police experts.

"Your gun was used in this killing," Ross said, "and you are the logical suspect. But you didn't have bullets in the gun, did you?"

"No," I answered, "I didn't."

"Whoever killed Bertha," the detective continued, "hated you. Any of these guys dislike you?"

"Only Roberts there," I answered. "He didn't care for me, and I got the impression he didn't like Bertha either."

Anger changed Roberts' expression entirely. There was a hint of madness in those greatly magnified eyes as he exhibited his vicious dislike for me.

"Bertha was giving him taps," he snapped. "A brand new man on the job and he gets taps. I'm supposed to get all the taps. He don't know what to do with them. I call people and they tell me they've already been called. He talks them out of two bucks, and I have them down for five grand."

Stark didn't say anything and neither did Wallace. I could see Ross' brain kicking over, wondering if he'd uncovered a motive for murder. Then, too, I remembered that I'd called a couple of people who had already been contacted.

"Well," Ross said wearily, "I don't have to wade through a lot of questions. We'll take your fingerprints, if you don't mind."

There was quick and vehement objection to that idea. "You might as well quit squawking," Ross advised them, "we're going to do it anyway."

ONE by one, the three of them were fingerprinted by Tiny. Perspiration beaded upon their faces and each of them displayed the characteristics of guilt.

"Why is this necessary?" Stark asked.

"We discovered that our killer made a mistake," Ross said baitingly. "He took care to wear gloves. He went to Coles' furnished room and stole the gun out of a bureau drawer. He wanted Bertha dead, and he knew that the girl was with Coles. Therefore, in Coles, he had a fall guy. The killer was in Bertha's apartment, here, when she got home.

"The girl had been piling up evidence against her employer and was preparing to turn it over to the prosecutor. But, foolishly, she had it lying in plain sight tonight, because she thought Bill Coles was a prosecutor's detective. Her killer took that evidence along with him. He shot Bertha and started down the stairs, just as Bill Coles here started up. He hid and slugged Bill, carted the body inside and doused both bodies with whisky to make the thing look like the outcome of a drunken spree."

Stark slid his tongue across his lower lip. He was very white. Roberts was close to Ross, peering into his face. Wallace's mouth hung open and his tooth sparkled brilliantly.

"You say the killer made a mistake?" Stark asked.

"Yes," Ross answered him triumphantly, "he did. He was very careful about prints, but he didn't wear gloves when he slipped the shells into the chamber of the revolver. We have two very excellent prints."

There was a sudden, sharp silence in the room. Even the police activity hushed, probably accidentally. Ross faced his suspects smilingly.

Abruptly, there was movement, swift and deadly. The killer darted away from the detective and made a desperate attempt to get to the door and freedom.

Tiny's big shoes squeaked loudly and protestingly as he lunged at the flying figure. There was considerable commotion in the room. Tiny's heavy fists slapped into solid flesh again and again. It was all over in a couple of minutes.

Wallace's gold tooth lay in the middle of the rug, winking up at the light. The sales manager was bleeding profusely and red blood welled from his mouth.

Stark looked at Wallace with eyes that refused to believe what they saw.

"This is screwy," he objected. "Wallace had no reason to kill her."

Belatedly, I got the whole picture. It was like a kaleidoscopic pattern shifting into sharp relief.

"Sure, he did," I said loudly. "He had to kill Bertha. She was all set to turn you in to the law and put you out of business. He was going to lose his sweet little racket."

Stark still didn't understand. Roberts was almost on my chest now, trying to see into my eyes.

"He was the sales manager, wasn't he?" I said. "And wasn't he the one who handed out the taps, as Roberts calls them?"

THE promoter got it then. "So that was it!" he cried hoarsely. Roberts caught on too.

"That dirty skunk," Roberts said shrilly, "was taking my five-thousand dollar taps, calling them, and picking up the check himself. Then he'd cash the check at the bank, put them down for only a thousand dollars contribution in the books and keep four grand himself."

"Could he work it that way?" Ross asked Stark.

"Yes," the promoter said, nodding. "We've been having a lot of cut-downs lately, on his calls." He explained. "A cut-down is what we call a man who usually gives five thousand every year and then, for no reason, cuts his contribution down to one."

Wallace was listening to us with bright, horror-filled eyes. His hands securely manacled behind his back, he looked up at the cop holding him.

"Please," he said brokenly, "Can I have my tooth?"

The cop bent to pick up the glistening gold incisor. Wallace brought his knee up and slammed the patrolman forward on his face. Then he made another rush for the door. Tiny shoved his long leg out, tripped the fugitive, and knocked him out.

When Wallace recovered consciousness he was in a voluble mood. He admitted that he had culled the big money taps from the piles he gave to Roberts, and called them himself. Then, because he deposited all the checks for Stark anyway, he would collect the big checks and cash them.

Bertha had grown suspicious of the numerous cut-downs and called several donors. Late in the afternoon, she'd told Wallace what she'd learned and threatened to go to Stark and the police with her information. So Wallace decided to kill her. When he saw me get into her car, he decided to frame me for the murder and searched my room, certain that all discharged servicemen had some souvenir guns. He was right.

"But what about that pile of evidence against Stark?" I queried, at ease now.

"I mailed that to the prosecutor myself," Wallace said. "I thought that all the trouble Stark would be in, would make him forget anything I'd pulled."

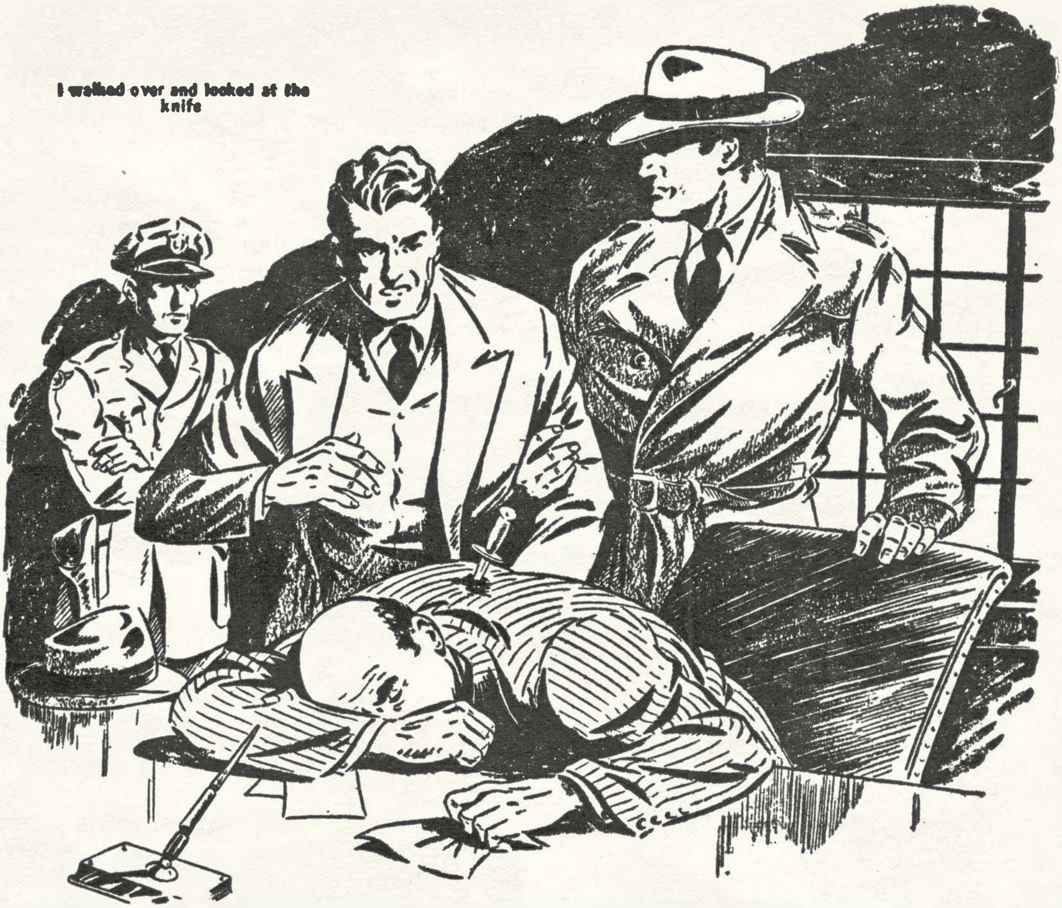
The police took Wallace away for murder. Stark was taken to jail for obtaining money under false pretenses. Roberts went along too. Ross grinned as I started to leave the apartment.

"You're lucky you didn't collect any of your commissions," he said, "or you'd go along to jail, too."

I nodded. "Now," I said gloomily, "I've got to look for a new job."

Ross chuckled heartily. "Well, here's a souvenir you can keep to remind you of this one." I took it dumbly.

It was Wallace's shiny, gold tooth.



I walked over and looked at the knife

EASY MONEY

By FRANK MORRIS

When Private Detective Paul Roche suddenly finds himself framed for murder, he saves himself by a hair's breadth!

DON'T let anybody tell you there's any easy money. It may look easy at the time, it may be acquired without much time or effort. But there's always a string to it—a string that may turn into a big hempen rope with a hangman's knot at the end.

"You're Mr. Roche?" she asked. "Paul Roche, detective?"

"Private investigator," I nodded, and lowered my hundred and ninety pounds to the swivel chair behind my desk.

Mrs. Lily Cordé was the name she gave. She sat there a moment looking me over, like I was a prize hog at a stock show. She was a little thing, with dark brown hair and blue eyes, togged out in some kind of a tan dress, and a little hat sat saucily on one side of her head. Her lips were firm above a well molded chin.

Then I remembered that name. Cordé.

She was the wife of Oscar Cordé, the stock broker, and the daughter of Edward Brider, the retired bail-bond broker and money-lender who lived out in Beverly Hills. But she didn't look at all like her father, not his big-boned frame nor rugged features. She must have taken after her mother.

Rather a funny thing, though, that the wife of Oscar Cordé should come to see me, to engage my services. It was especially peculiar, in view of what old Ed Brider had told me last Saturday.

"Don't think I'm crazy," she broke in my thoughts, and a smile crinkled around her mouth, "but I'll pay you five hundred dollars to take a little auto ride with me. Probably about three hours, not more than four."

"Sounds tempting," I said, and smiled back at her. "What's the catch?"

"Catch?" She looked me squarely in the eyes. "There isn't any catch, Mr. Roche. I need protection on that ride. That is, I probably won't need you at all, but I want you along, just in case."

"Just in case of what?" I asked.

"I don't know. Really I don't. I've got to go to a certain place tonight, and I don't want to go alone. But there is one condition to it."

"Uh-huh," I nodded. "I thought so. What's the condition?"

"Just before I get to where I'm going, I'll stop the car. You are to lie down on the floor between the two seats and I'll cover you with a car-robe. When I get to where I'm going, I'll get out of the car for a few minutes—probably not more than five minutes. Then I'll get back in the car, turn around and come back. When I reach the place where you got between the seats, I'll stop again, and you can sit in the front seat with me."

I SAT there and looked at her a moment. She wasn't kidding, she was soberly serious. She opened her purse, took out a roll of bills, and counted off ten fifties, laid them on the desk in front of her.

She didn't want me to be seen in the car with her, that was plain. And she didn't want me to see anything or anybody. It had all the signs of paying off a ransom on a kidnap, and I didn't like it. A thing like that could take my license away, if nothing worse. But I would be innocent of anything the cops could bring up. And I needed that five hundred bucks.

"It's during that five minutes, before you turn around and head back, that you think you might need me?" I asked.

"That's right," she nodded. "If nothing happens, you won't be needed. If something happens, I'll need you, and fast. You will, of course, go armed."

I turned my head and looked out the window, thinking it over. Should I take the money, agree to go with her, and then report the whole thing to Ed Brider? This was his daughter; maybe he'd know what it was all about. Or should I take her offer, say nothing to Brider, and see what I could learn? That way, I might learn something about the things Brider had wanted me to find out for him.

But there was another angle, too. If nothing happened, we just rode back to town. But if something did happen, I was to come out shooting. I knew how to do that, all right. But what would I be stacked up against? I turned my eyes back to her.

"One little thing I'll have to know," I told her. "If I come out from under that car-robe shooting, will I be shooting at cops?"

"No, there's not one chance in ten thousand that a policeman will be within miles of the place. If there were police, I'll hardly need you." She smiled at the thought.

"Then why don't you get a cop to go with you?" I asked.

"It's purely a private matter, Mr. Roche," she explained. "I'd rather not have the police mixed up in it. But I do want a man with a gun, one who has a right to go armed and knows how to shoot."

I reached out and picked up the money, and she stood up.

"I'll pick you up here at your office at eight o'clock tonight," she smiled. "That will give us time enough."

"That'll be okay," I nodded. She closed the door softly behind her as she went out.

Well, that was that. I'd let myself in for something, maybe, but I didn't know what. I didn't care much, either, as long as I wasn't going up against the cops. A private detective can't afford to shoot at the police. It just isn't done in polite society.

It was a laugh, though. We left my office at eight o'clock, with me sitting up in the front seat beside her in that big Cadillac eight sedan. We went out through San Fernando Valley, and just before we got to Newhall, she turned into Mint Canyon road. We went along this for maybe ten, twelve miles, then she pulled over on the shoulder and said it was time for me to get in the back of the car. I laid down on the floor between the back seat and the front seat, and she threw a big car-robe over me. I took out my gun and held it in my hand.

The car started, went about a hundred feet, then she turned off the pavement to the left. This road wasn't paved, seemed to be sand and gravel. We drove along this for perhaps two miles, then she stopped. She got out of the car, and I heard her open the turtle-back and lift something out. She closed the turtle-back, and I heard her heels tapping on cement.

Then I heard a dull thud a little ways off, and started to raise up, when I heard her heels tapping again. She opened the door, got in the car and started it. She drove a few yards, pulled onto the righthand shoulder, then a sharp cut of the wheels to bring the front of the car to the opposite side of the road. She backed a little, went forward, and zoomed away from there. When she stopped the car again, she was on Mint Canyon road pavement, about the same place where I got into the back of the car.

"You can come out now, Mr. Roche," she said.

I threw the robe aside, stood up and opened the door. I stepped out and around the end of the front seat, sat down, and reached out to close the door. But I didn't touch the inside handle. Instead, I put my hand outside and pressed the end of my fingers against the polished surface of the door under the handle. Then I closed the door. It wouldn't hurt to have my fingerprints some place where they'd not likely be found unless I pointed them out.

SHE started the car rolling.

"That was easy money," I grinned.

"I thought it would be like that," she said pleasantly. "But I couldn't afford to take chances."

We rolled on in silence a little while. Then I began to talk about the coming Rose Bowl game, and other little things till she pulled to a stop in front of the bungalow where I lived. My wrist watch showed half past twelve.

"And thanks a lot, Mr. Roche." She smiled when I got out.

"You know, there's one thing I like about you. You don't ask questions about something that must seem rather queer to you."

"This isn't a case where I'm paid to ask questions," I said.

"That's right, too." She nodded. "Good night."

Well, that was easy money. Up to there. As she drove away, I automatically noted the license number on the back of the car.

It was exactly seven o'clock next morning when I was awakened by the ringing of my doorbell. I threw on a robe, put my feet in house-slippers, and there. "Hello, Gus," I greeted. "Come in."

He followed me back to the bedroom. Gus was one of Captain Conlon's men—and Conlon was head of homicide.

"While I get dressed," I said, "you can tell me what's on your mind. Or is this just a social call?"

"Huh!" Gus snorted. "Cap'n Conlon wants to see you, Paul. An' right away."

"What about?" I asked, and sniffed.

"He didn't say." Gus grinned.

I let it lie. I went into the bathroom, showered and shaved, dressed, and was ready to go in twenty-five minutes. Gus drove the police car out to Beverly Hills, and pulled to a stop in front of Ed Brider's palatial home. There were three other police cars parked in front.

Gus led me into the library, where Captain Bert Conlon sat in a chair pulled up to the big center table. At the west end of the room, where there were a lot of wide windows, was a big desk. Behind the desk sat old Ed Brider. He was slumped over, arms cradling his bald head with the right cheek resting on the glass top, and from between his shoulder blades protruded the handle of a knife.

"Here he is, Cap'n," Gus said, and stepped back toward the door. Conlon looked up at me.

His face might have been carved from granite, and his cold gray eyes pieces of flint. Eyes that said no matter what I told him, he wouldn't believe me. His dark gray hair seemed to bristle like the hackles on a dog's neck. I knew that he hated the sight of me, and nothing would give him more pleasure than to see me buckled into the San Quentin hot seat. That's where he'd been trying to shove me for the past five years.

Every time we'd locked horns in the past, he'd lost. And every time he lost, he hated me that much more. I'd always beaten him to the punch, to the payoff, robbed him of all the credit for solving various murders. I'd been just plain lucky on the cases, and correspondingly unlucky with Captain Bert Conlon.

But none of this showed on the surface when I came in. The way he greeted me, his tone of voice and flashing smile, you'd think I was an old and very close friend.

"Hello, Paul," he said. "Sorry to rouse you out of bed so early in the morning. But this seems to be a little case of murder."

He was just too nice and friendly, like I'd done him a big favor.

"Yeah, it has all the ear-marks," I agreed warily. "You sent for me because you want me to solve it for you, I suppose?"

"Not this one, Paul," Conlon said, and his voice was strangely soft. Conlon wouldn't talk like that unless he was pretty sure of himself. He let his eye rove over me as I stood there, from my thatch of red hair to the oxfords on my feet. "You've already solved this one, Paul—all but one little point. Take a close look at the haft of that knife in his back."

I WALKED over to the desk and around the end of it, stooped down and looked at the haft of the knife. Conlon was beside me, his hand on my arm. As I straightened up, his grip tightened.

"Ever see it before?" he asked, voice still soft.

"Uh-huh." I nodded. "It's mine. I used it on my desk as a letter-opener. It has my initials on the handle."

"That's right." Conlon beamed. "Now you see what I mean, Paul. Just explain how your knife happens to be in his back, just that one little point, and you'll have solved the murder for us, old pal."

"I don't know a thing about it," I said emphatically, and little beads of sweat broke out on my forehead.

Conlon held on to my arm, led me back to the center table, sat me in a chair beside it, and stood spraddle-legged looking down at me. His face wasn't pleasant any more.

"So you don't know a thing about it!" His voice was a snarl. "Don't give me that stuff, Paul Roche. You know all about it."

Then he walked around and sat down on the other side of the table, looked at me steadily for a long half minute. When he spoke again, his voice was calmer.

"Old Brider was a hard man, Roche. A money-lender after he retired. That's the way he made his pile, gouging his victims. The wonder to me is that somebody hasn't knocked him off sooner. How much did you owe him, Roche? How much had you borrowed from him and couldn't pay back?"

"I didn't owe him a dime," I snapped. "I never borrowed any money from the old devil in my life."

"Says you," Conlon snorted. "Well, a check of his records will show how much you owe him. Where were you around ten o'clock last night, Roche?"

"That's when the doc says he was killed?" I asked.

"Right." Conlon nodded. "Where were you?"

"I was out on a case," I answered. "Making some easy money."

"Hah, on a case. A case of stabbing, huh?"

"Nuh-uh. I was out with a blond," I said. "We drove out San Fernando Valley, out Mint Canyon road a ways, and came back. We left at eight and got back at half past twelve."

Conlon didn't seem to like that much. He'd been so cock-sure that he had me over a barrel with that knife. An airtight alibi would leave him holding the bag. He glared at me, and drummed his stubby fingers on the table-top.

"That should be easy enough to verify," he said. "Who was the blond?"

"She was Mrs. Lily Cordé," I replied. "At least, that's the name she gave. The daughter of old Ed Brider, over there." I jerked my head at the corpse. "She paid me five hundred dollars to ride out there and back with her."

"Why?" There was a funny look on Conlon's face, and his eyes gleamed.

"Said she didn't want to make the trip alone, wanted an armed man with her." And I told him all about the trip.

"You're lying, Roche," Conlon said flatly. "We've got the goods on you this time, and you're trying to crawl out."

"Call in Mrs. Cordé," I demanded. "As you said, it should be easy enough to verify."

"That's where you're wrong." Conlon shook his head. "Mrs. Cordé is a brunette. She and her husband say they spent the evening at a picture show around the corner. I checked up, and the ticket seller and the usher both remember them. You're sunk, Roche."

"Get 'em in here," I snarled. "Let me put the questions to her."

"Bring 'em in, Gus," Conlon said.

He sat back in his chair, a wolfish grin on his lean face. They must have been waiting in the room across the hall, Gus was back with them so quickly.

THE man, I knew, was Oscar Cordé; I'd seen him before. But the woman was not the one who drove the car on the ride out Mint Canyon road the night before.

I looked at Lily Cordé, and I looked at Oscar Cordé. She had small features, dark brown eyes, and hair so dark it was almost black. She wore a simple little house dress, cut low in the neck. She was small-boned, but plump. In her early thirties.

Oscar Cordé was a tall angular man, well built, about forty, and evidently somewhat of an athlete in his younger days. His face was long, with high cheek bones, but his chin was none too pronounced. Little gray eyes, set close together over a prominent nose, and rather full lips. He had well-kept hands with long fingers, and he smoothed back his sandy bushy hair as he sat down. A few flakes of dandruff fell on his dark coat.

"All right," Conlon rasped. "Ask her all the questions you want, Roche."

"No use," I shrugged, and turned my eyes from her to Conlon. "She's not the lady that made the midnight ride with me last night."

"Oh, so that's the way it is, eh?" Conlon scoffed.

"Yeah, that's the way it is," I snapped, and motioned for Gus to take the Cordés out. When he closed the door, I turned and faced Conlon. "All right, go ahead and arrest me," I told him.

Conlon looked at me hard, and again that funny little look was in his eyes. My sudden assurance seemed to make him hesitate.

"Not so fast, Roche," he said softly. "What makes you so sure we can't pin this on you?"

"That knife," I said. "Sure, it's my knife. You've seen it on my desk many times, and it was there when I left the office yesterday. Anybody could have gone in there after I left and got it."

"So you claim it's a frame-up, eh?" he demanded.

"Certainly it's a frame-up," I said. "You should be able to see that. If I was going to kill the old man, I wouldn't have used a knife with my initials on the handle. And if I had used it, I wouldn't have left it sticking in him for the cops to find. It's much too obvious."

"Maybe that's exactly why you did it," Conlon sneered.

"What d'you mean, exactly why I did it?" I demanded.

"You're smart, Roche. You're no fool." The Captain nodded. "You knew that if we found your knife in his back, we'd suspicion you. But you'd yell 'frame-up', and say you'd be a darn fool to use your own knife, or leave it there for us to find. But it won't work, Roche."

"What about motive?" I asked. "Why should *I* kill Ed Brider?"

"Borrowed money, probably," Conlon said grimly. "But I'll find out, you can bet your last dime on that."

"You can't find something that doesn't

exist," I shot back at him. "I hardly knew the man, except by reputation."

"Says you. Then why should anybody try to frame you?" Conlon asked softly.

"That's something else again," I replied.

The palms of my hands felt sweaty. I wasn't ready to tell him yet about Brider calling me to his office last Saturday, and the conference we'd had. Conlon would jump at that—he'd say the motive grew out of that visit. I was saving that for the showdown.

"In my line of work, there are a lot of people who don't like me," I said finally.

"You're right about that." Conlon grinned sourly. "Lots of people don't like you. Including cops."

"This job was done by somebody who knew this house and its layout, Conlon," I pointed out. "It wasn't done by any stranger. It was somebody who knew how to get in and out, somebody whose presence here wouldn't be questioned."

"That's obvious." Conlon scowled.

"And that lets me out," I flung back. "I've never been inside the house before."

"Says you," Conlon sneered.

BUT he didn't like it. He turned and looked at the man slumped on the desk. He walked over to the big windows and looked out. After a couple of minutes he turned and came back, stood looking down at me where I sat at the table, face grim.

"All right, Roche," he snapped, and walked around the table and sat down. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt—for the time being. You can go."

"You're not going to arrest me, huh?" I asked.

"No. Not now, at least. You're on your own until I pull you in again."

"Want my gun?" I made a motion toward my shoulder.

"No, keep it," Conlon said flatly. "You're still in good standing. Just keep your nose clean."

I was a little surprised, but said nothing. One thing I'll say for Conlon, I'd always found him fair. I sat there a moment and looked at him. Maybe he was just giving me enough rope, with the hope I'd hang myself. I looked over at old man Brider. From where I was sitting, the dead man's head was pointing at me. There was something that I'd missed, something that didn't click.

I sat there a moment and frowned at the corpse. Then I got up and walked around the end of the table and on to the desk where the old man sprawled. He had on a dark brown smoking jacket, or house coat, and the way his arms were around his head, the sleeves were wrinkled up near the shoulder.

I stooped down and looked closer, and Conlon got up and came around and stood beside me. I reached out and picked up two hairs that lay partly concealed in a wrinkle. They were light brown, blond, and about three inches long when I straightened them out. Too short for a woman's bob.

"Where'd they come from?" Conlon asked, and held out his hand.

"They were almost hidden in the wrinkle in his sleeve," I said, and laid them in his palm. He took an envelope out of his pocket and put them in it, then put the envelope back in his pocket. I walked back to my chair on the other side of the table.

"All right, you can go," Conlon said again.

"Nuh-uh," I said, and sat there. "When I go, you're going with me, Captain."

"Go with you?" Conlon asked, and his bushy eyebrows arched up in surprise. "I got more important things to do, Roche."

"Yeah, I know." I nodded, and grinned. "Things like trying to pin a murder on me. But that's why you're going with me."

"Where—and why?" Conlon asked, and stuck his face out at me.

"You'll see where when we get there," I said. "And the why is that I'm going to prove that what I told you is true."

Conlon didn't say anything. He stood up, and I did, too. He led the way and we went out to one of the police cars at the curb.

A young policeman in uniform drove, and the car took us out over the same route that I had gone the night before. We came to a stop at the side road that led off to the left and up into the hills.

"I want to check the tire marks," I

said, and motioned for the driver to turn into the side road. Fifty feet in he stopped again, and Conlon grinned at me.

"Tire marks, is it?" he asked softly, then his face sobered.

That road now looked like at least a dozen cars had been driven over it recently. All with practically smooth tires. Whatever marks the big Cadillac sedan had left were entirely obliterated, not a sign of them left.

"Okay." I shrugged. "Drive on till we come to a cement culvert. I'm sure it was a culvert, because I heard her heels click on cement, and the road isn't paved."

WE FOUND the culvert about two miles along the side road, and the dozen or more cars had been driven over that whole distance, and disappeared over a rise. It could be seen that only one car had made at least five or six round trips.

"Looks like somebody succeeded pretty well in destroying the marks left by the car you claim to have ridden in," Conlon observed.

"Why would anybody want to destroy the tire marks?" I asked. "Even you must see that it's part of the frame-up. So I wouldn't be able to prove an alibi."

"Some more of your smart work, Roche, trying to throw us off the trail," Conlon sneered. "You came out here and ran a car back and forth over the road, a car with smooth tires, to make it look like somebody had tried to eliminate the tire marks. Marks that were never here. It's a pretty build-up, Roche. But you're not fooling me. Not a bit."

I got out of the car, Conlon at my heels. I began at the culvert, walking slowly, searching the ground. I paid particular attention to the right-hand shoulder. I found it about fifty feet beyond the culvert.

"Here it is," I told Conlon. "You see the marks where a car pulled onto the shoulder here?" I walked across the road. "And here where it pulled onto the left shoulder and backed around, then headed out again. It's easy to see those are not the same tires that made the other marks."

"No, they're larger, and with a good tread," Conlon agreed. "You sure went to a lot of trouble, Roche." He was still unconvinced.

He got his outfit from the police car, and started to make a moulage of the tire marks.

"You won't need those," I told him. "The license plates on the car I was in were four-two-H-nine-nine-one-two."

"Why the devil didn't you tell me that before?" Conlon snarled. "Why drag me away out here, waste my time?"

"I wanted you to see those marks for yourself," I told him.

"I'll take the casts, anyway," Conlon persisted, "just to check the tires of the car that bears that number. You certainly are a glutton for details."

"And there's another little thing," I said, and stooped down over one of the marks left by the smooth tires. "These smooth tire marks were all made by one car. That car had a patch on the right rear wheel—you can see the mark of it here in the track. It was on the outerside of the wheel, the curb side, and on the inside of the casing, but the casing was pretty thin and the patch bulged out just a little bit. You might take an impression of that, too, while you're at it."

Conlon came and squatted down beside, and grunted when I pointed out the faint depression made by the bulge of the patch. He stood up and walked a few feet and squatted again, then got up and moved a few feet more. At a distance of about every revolution of the car's wheel, we found that faint impression. It wasn't noticeable unless you looked close.

Conlon grunted again and stood up, looked at me, looked down at the tire marks. Then he walked over and examined the marks left by the big sedan. In one place there was a stretch of about ten feet where they showed up plain, and there wasn't any indication of a tire patch on them.

"Okay," Conlon agreed grudgingly. "I'll take an impression of that tire patch, too."

"Yeah," I said, "and I want you to check the tires on my car, too, especially for that tire patch."

"Your tires aren't smooth, are they?" Conlon asked, and a crooked little grin twisted his lips.

"Nuh-uh," I said. "I just had retreads put on all around about a month back."

AFTER we got back to town, it took Conlon only a couple of minutes to find out that the license number I gave him belonged to a car owned by the Pacific U-Drive Company. A rental car. We drove over to their place on South Figueroa Street, and the big sedan was there, parked in a stall. I showed Conlon where I'd left my fingerprints under the handle of the righthand door.

"All right," Conlon barked at the owner. "Who rented that car last night?"

"A young lady, a blonde. She gave the name of Mary Sloan," the owner said, looking at his book of rentals. "Gave her address as four-seven-seven-four West Mendoza Drive."

"All right. Come on, Roche, we'll go out and talk to her, see what she has to say," Conlon said.

"A phony name and address," I said. "You won't find any Mary Sloan there."

Conlon stopped in mid-stride, turned and glared at me. He was really mad this time.

"We'd better," he snarled. "If we don't, Roche, I'll slap you in jail. This is going too far." Then he quieted down a little, and a puzzled frown built up between his eyes. "I don't get it," he said. "That girl in your office's named Mary—but she's a brunette. This guy says the car was rented by a blond."

I knew what Conlon was thinking—that I'd had my secretary hire the car for me. I just grinned at him and shook my head.

We'd gone about half way to Mendoza Street, when Conlon's radio began to blare. "Captain Conlon! Captain Conlon of Homicide!"

Conlon flicked the switch and barked into the mike. "This is Conlon."

"There's a dead girl, four-seven-seven-four West Yseldo Road," the tinny voice intoned. "Name, Mary Sturgeon. You're wanted at once."

"Huh!" Conlon muttered. "Same number, one block away. Same first name. She was an amateur at playing crook."

When we reached the address I found it was the same girl, all right. The one that told me she was Mrs. Lily Cordé, and later drove me out over Mint Canyon road. But she was dead now. There was a large lump on the back of her head, and her throat had been cut. The landlady told Conlon that she was a movie extra, and that she got home a little after one o'clock the night before. In Mary's purse Conlon found nineteen fifty dollar bills, two twenties, a five, and some change. The remains of a thousand dollars—the price she was paid, evidently, to take me on that midnight ride.

"This is further proof of a frame-up," I pointed out to Conlon. "Whoever hired her had to close her mouth."

"All right, Roche, what's the answer?" Conlon demanded. His face was grim. "You know something I don't. Who's the murderer?"

"No proof, yet," I answered. "Let's go out to Ed Brider's place again, there's something out there I'd like to show you."

When we got to Brider's house, I led the way around to the big garage at the back. There we found an old Chevy coupé. All four of the tires were smooth, and the right rear showed the bulge of a patch inside the casing. Conlon stared at it, looked at me, and nodded.

"Let's go in," he said.

Gus was still on duty, and he brought Mr. and Mrs. Cordé into the library. Brider's body had long since been removed. Conlon sat at the big center table again, and I sat at the end on his right. Gus brought up two chairs for the Cordés, and placed them on the other side of the table. As Oscar sat down, he ran his hand over his hair to smooth it down.

When they were seated, Conlon turned to me.

"All right, Roche," he said. "It's your show."

"You both went to the picture show last night," I began. "That's the Orion, around the corner on the boulevard?"

I LOOKED at Mrs. Cordé, and she nodded.

"That's right," Oscar said, and his smile showed good teeth.

"About what time was that, Mrs. Cordé?" I inquired.

"I didn't look at the clock, but we got seated shortly before the second show began. It starts at a quarter to nine."

"That would make it about eight thirty when you left home?"

"I imagine so," she nodded.

"And do you remember just about where you sat?"

"Yes. In the center row, not quite half way down."

"And you remained there in the show until the end—about what time was that?"

"About eleven thirty, I should judge," she said.

"And you both were there, seated side by side, throughout the whole show?" I repeated.

"Yes, sure," she answered.

"You didn't get up, leave your husband sitting there, and go to the ladies' room?" I insisted.

"No, I did not."

"And Mr. Cordé, he sat there beside you all the time?"

"Yes, except for one trip to the lounge, when they changed pictures. There was a short intermission, and the lights came on, and Oscar said he wanted to go to the lounge."

"How long was he gone?" I asked, and pulled some papers out of my pocket and began to look through them. They didn't have anything to do with the case, but she didn't know that.

"I didn't notice, but it wasn't long, I'm sure."

"Would you say he was gone half an hour?"

"No, I hardly think so. It didn't seem that long."

"Fifteen minutes?"

"It might have been, but I don't think it was."

"And that was about ten o'clock, or a little after, when the pictures changed?" Cordé wasn't smiling now.

"Yes, I think so," she answered.

"Now, the movie house runs almost through the whole block, with a small lot on the same street this house is on. And your place here is about a half block from that lot. Did you go in the back way, or did you go around and go in front?"

"We went—yes, there is a small paved area-way along side the building, leading to the front. We went down to the lot, across it, and through the area-way to the front to get the tickets."

"All right. Now, Mr. Cordé." I turned and looked at him. I knew who killed Brider and the girl, and how it was done. Something in my eyes must have told him—his eyes suddenly gleamed.

"Yes," he said, and shifted a little in his seat.

"Mary Sturgeon is dead," I said softly. If he was surprised, he didn't show it.

"Who's Mary Sturgeon?" he asked. His voice was calm, but his eyes were bright with fear.

"She was the little movie extra you hired to impersonate your wife, Mrs. Cordé."

"That's a lie!" Cordé snarled, and started to rise from his chair.

"Sit down," I said, and my gun was in my hand.

CONLON sat with his hands folded on the table in front of him. At sight of the gun he started to say something, but didn't. His face hardened.

"During that intermission, you didn't go to the lounge," I went on. "You slipped out a side door, crossed a lot, hurried here and killed old Ed Brider. It wouldn't take more than three minutes fast walking each way.

"Then after you and your wife came home, and she was asleep, you slipped out of the house, drove the Chevy with the smooth tires and obliterated the tire marks where Mary Sturgeon had driven over that lonely road off Mint Canyon. Then you went to her room and killed her. You couldn't let her live; she'd be able to tell too much."

"You're crazy!" Cordé sneered. "Why should I kill Brider?"

"And try to frame it on me?" I grinned sourly. "You saw me up in Brider's office last Saturday morning. You're a stock broker, and Brider had given you some stocks to handle. He got the idea you had misappropriated them. You had put them up as collateral in the stock market—and lost. Ed Brider hired me to check up on you, and you knew it. So you killed him for two reasons. First, so that your theft of the stock wouldn't be exposed, and second, so that your wife would inherit the old man's millions."

"I still say you're crazy," Cordé said, and his chin tilted arrogantly. He was going to brazen it out, I could see that. His word against mine. "Just the dopey theory of a crazy snooper. You haven't got one shred of proof," he snarled.

"Oh, yes, I have," I grinned. "You see, Cordé, you've got a pretty bad case of dander. Even right now, there are some hairs from your bushy head on your coat, and a few flakes. When you sneaked out of the movie last night, before you put your hat on you slicked back your hair, just as you did when you sat down just now. That caused several hairs to shed off onto your coat. And when you struck that knife into Ed Brider's back, you bent over him to be sure he was dead. A couple of those sandy hairs fell off on the old man's jacket, and were hidden in a wrinkle of a sleeve. The Captain here has them.

"You see, Brider was bald as an egg, and I knew they weren't his. Then, too, you forgot about the patch on the rear right wheel of the Chevy. It showed up in the tire marks and proves it was your car that obliterated the marks left by the big sedan."

Oscar leaned forward in his chair, reached down and examined his shoelaces. When he straightened up, there was a gun in his hand. I didn't wait to see what he was going to do with it—whether he was going to shoot himself, or try to shoot me. I flicked my gun and shot it from his hand. Mrs. Cordé screamed, and Gus jumped from the door and grabbed him.

"Well, that's that," I said, and stood up. Mrs. Cordé sat in her chair, crying. "She didn't know anything about it, Conlon," I added. "But the credit is all yours. You can tell the newspaper boys how you solved the murder. I'm not in it."

That seemed to make a hit with the captain. He grinned, and his eyes brightened.

"I always said you were a smart guy, Roche," he said.

Maybe he didn't hate me any more, huh?

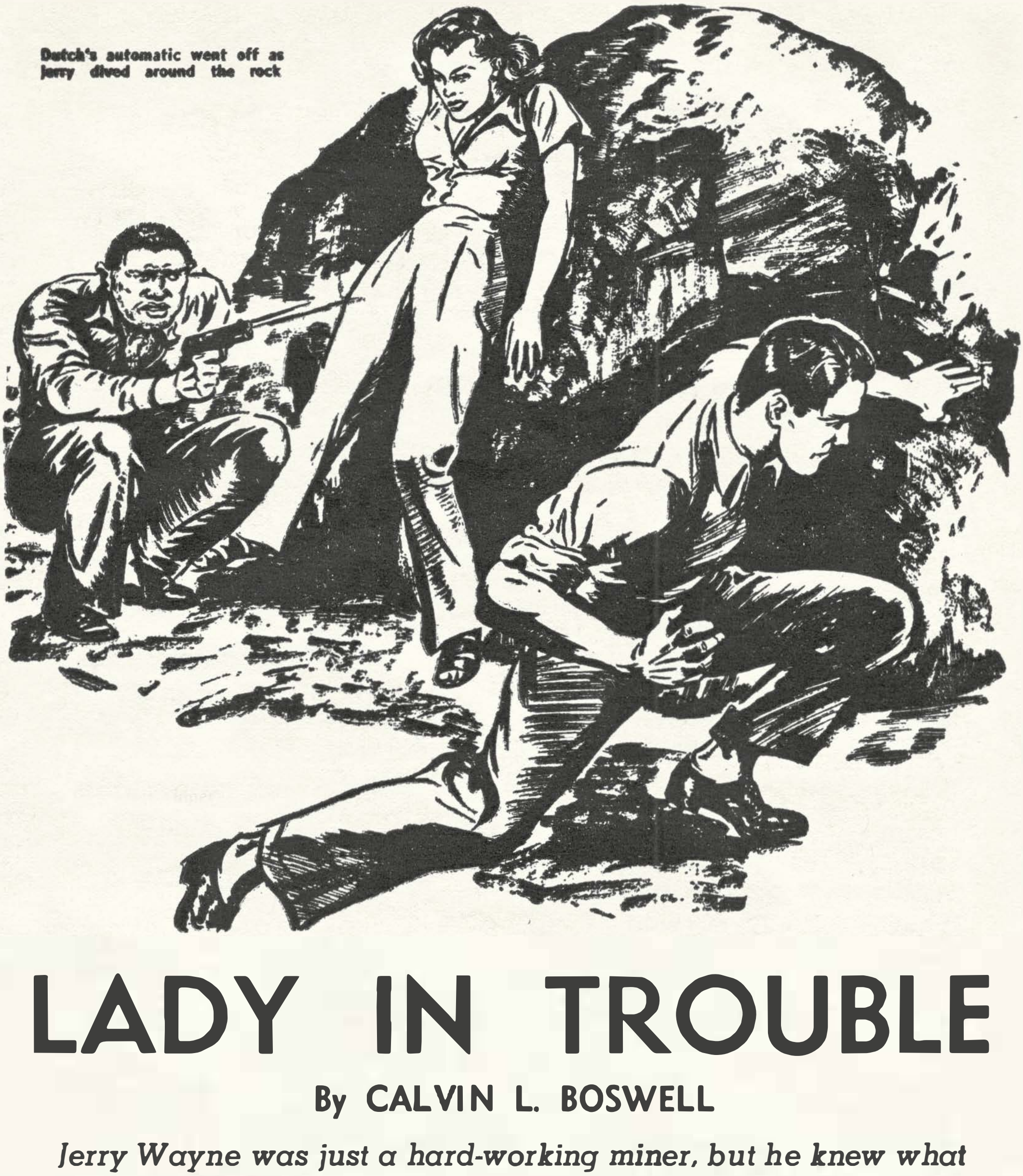
The Tell-Tale Spot!

JUDGE HOLLISTER stood on the top of the steep stairs and turned his flashlight on. Then he saw the spot about six inches from the first step. The soft lapping of water against piling and beach intensified the silence.

"It's nothing at all," he said to himself. "Just a spot on the floor!"

Almost against his will, he bent down to examine the spot. Yes, it was blood. It looked the same as the blood that was on the piling below. And—if Charles Ross had met his death by accident, if he had fallen to his doom on the piling below, what was a bloodstain doing *here!*

That's only one of the many baffling questions that come up in MURDER ON MIDNIGHT, the gripping crime novelet by Wyatt Blassingame appearing in our next issue. It's a mystery that will keep you guessing from start to finish!



Dutch's automatic went off as Jerry dived around the rock

LADY IN TROUBLE

By CALVIN L. BOSWELL

Jerry Wayne was just a hard-working miner, but he knew what to do when he met a pretty girl and a pair of bank robbers!

THE lady was in trouble.

It was quite obvious, because she stood in the hot smash of mid-day sunlight, waving frantically and pointing to a car parked on the edge of the narrow desert highway.

Jerry Wayne eased his battered jalopy to a stop and climbed out. The lady was young and something to gaze upon in brown slacks and a shirt of some silky material, the car a snappy-looking red Packard convertible of the four-passenger variety. Its left rear tire was flat and chewed to ribbons.

With a rueful grin that lighted up his homely Irish face, Jerry said, "Tough break, Miss. Can I help?"

She didn't answer and he noticed that her face was taut, her lips working in tiny unconscious patterns. His grin faded and he started to ask her what was wrong; and then his eyes went over her shoulder, and panic was an iron claw that clutched at his windpipe.

A guy had his head stuck around the edge of the convertible, over the door on the left side. He had small eyes like live black beetles and thick, rubbery lips spread flat over a mouthful of yellow teeth. There was a heavy automatic rooted in a hairy paw that hung limply over the door.

Grinning with the pleasantry of a Belsen torturer, he said:

"We kind of figured you'd stop, with Gorgeous out there waving at you. She ain't got no spare."

He got out leisurely, came forward at a shambling walk. He was built like a gorilla, with a short neck, thick, sloping shoulders and something of a paunch.

From the other side of the Packard a harsh, whiney voice said:

"Dutch, you're a witless ape. I told you to let him go by. How far do you think we'll get in that clunk?"

Dutch's grin went snarly and he spun around, glared at a tall, bony man with a sallow face and eyes as soulless as a lizard's under pale eyebrows.

"I thought I told you to stop calling me names, Quimp. You know damned well there won't be many cars going through until it gets cooler. We're lucky we got this one."

Jerry gazed levelly at the girl and said with sour emphasis, "That was as nice a trap as I ever fell into, sister."

"Please," she said plaintively, desperately. "I couldn't help myself."

Quimp moved over to Jerry's car, took a look inside and said:

"Jeez, provisions! The back of this can looks like the guy robbed a grocery store."

Dutch said, "Hah!" And to Jerry, "Where was you going, pal? Got some diggings around here, maybe?"

"Maybe," Jerry answered curtly. 'What's it to you?"

DUTCH looked slow and clumsy, but his tremendous size was infinitely deceiving. His hand flicked out and the gun barrel caught Jerry on the big muscle that joined his neck to his left shoulder. The blow nearly paralyzed him and he sprawled sidewise on the hot roadway.

Reaching down, Dutch yanked him to his feet by the front of his shirt, pulled him so close that his sour breath was a nauseating cloud and said harshly, nastily:

"Give, pal. You ain't delivering them provisions from here to there."

"You'd better talk," advised the girl, whose name was Mary. "He'd as soon murder you as not. He's quite experienced at it."

Jerry made strangling sounds and Dutch released him, stepped back.

"Tell him, Gorgeous," he urged. "Then maybe we won't have to waste a lot of time roughing him up to keep him in line."

She flayed Dutch with her eyes and said, "I came down from San Francisco to visit an old college chum of mine, and stopped in a drug store back in Midland to ask directions to her father's ranch. When I came out and got into the car these two men were in back. They made me drive to the Midland Trust and the big one got out and held it up and shot the manager."

"Yah." Dutch nodded and grinned as if he were expecting a pat on the back. "Them hick banks is pushovers. The guy thought he'd be the hero and now they're buying him a wooden overcoat. We got away clean, too. Headed north through town and cut around the edge and come out the south end. The cops must be up to Bakersfield, by now, hunting for us."

"Someday you're gonna shoot off your big bazoo and get your foot in it," Quimp said dourly.

Dutch swiveled his head around on those thick, sloping shoulders of his and spoke with a sort of deadly patience.

"Maybe you don't hear good," he said. "I thought I told you to stop riding me."

Quimp turned the corners of his mouth down, shrugged, and Dutch turned to Jerry.

"You ready to talk?"

Jerry wet his lips with the tip of his tongue, swallowed as if it hurt him.

"I've got a mine up in those hills," he said. And extended a lean, bare arm toward a low range of mountains off to the right. "I was in town for supplies."

"Hear that, Quimp?" Dutch declared triumphantly. "The rat's got a hole. We can lay up there till the heat's off." He motioned to the jalopy and Jerry climbed wordlessly behind the wheel. The girl started to get in beside him and Dutch said, "Nah-ah, Gorgeous. In back with Quimp and the groceries."

Quimp got in after her and muttered darkly, "They'll come along and spot that Packard and telegraph the next town and then where'll we be?"

Dutch looked craftily at Jerry out of the corners of his eyes.

"Go ahead, pal; you answer that one."

"We turn off the highway about two miles up," Jerry said shortly. He got the car in motion and Dutch leaned back, propped a big foot up on the dashboard.

"Jeez," he chuckled, "won't them cops be surprised when we turn up missing."

They made the turnoff, swung into a dirt road that was little more than a pair of tire tracks. Jerry fought the wheel and pondered the darkening conviction that began to fester in his mind. Once safe from pursuit, Dutch would kill both him and the girl as casually as he'd swat a fly. It was something to worry about, and set his thoughts to racing like a chipmunk on a hot rock.

THEY ground along for several hours, most of the time in second gear, and by then some of the strained, worried look had gone out of his face. The wheel tracks took them down into a shallow arroyo strewn with water-worn boulders and Quimp began to curse fretfully at being bounced around like a walnut on a sorting screen.

In the midst of his tirade Jerry said, "Hup!" as the bucking car jerked the wheel out of his hands. There was a large rock to his right and the car swerved, struck it a glancing blow and exploded upward as if it had hit a land mine.

Out of the wild confusion of arms and legs and canned goods came Quimp's raucous, angry voice:

"Look where you're going, will you? I almost busted my neck against the top of this clunk!" Silence for a breath, and then— "Hey, the motor!"

"Yah." If suspicion were a fine steel wire, Dutch's was stretched to the breaking point. "What happened? She's stopped."

"I dunno." Jerry looked puzzled. "Something shook loose, I guess."

They all got out and Dutch hung over Jerry's shoulder while he fiddled around under the hood, checking the electrical terminals. He straightened, finally, shook his head. "It beats me," he murmured frustratedly.

"You better think of an answer, pal," Dutch said darkly.

"There isn't any," Jerry shrugged, "except walking. We're a little over halfway to my cabin. I've got a one-ton truck up there, and we can drive down later and tow the jalopy in."

"Dutch," Quimp said sharply, "I don't like this. He's trying to pull a fast one. Hell, let's bump him and follow them tire tracks ourselves."

Dutch got his gun out and Jerry tried to keep the desperation out of his voice.

"You'll never make it to the cabin without a guide," he said. "There are three more turnoffs after we hit the hills."

"Blast it, why don't you kill him?" Quimp burst out. "You thickheaded fool, can't you see you're getting sucked in?"

Dutch's face contorted; his lips went flat against his teeth. Mary screamed as he spun on one heel and pressed the trigger of the automatic twice. The shots made echoes like dumping hardwood in an airshaft. One of the big slugs caught Quimp high in the shoulder, spun him around and flung him against the side of the car. He slid to the ground as if he were coming apart in sections and lay there with the blood staining his shirt a bright crimson.

Dutch shambled forward, callously turned Quimp over with his foot, and appropriated a gun from his hip pocket. Lifting his head, he grinned hideously at Jerry and the girl.

"The rat's been riding me ever since we teamed up in Bakersfield yesterday," he said. "I don't like my fur rubbed the wrong way; and that goes for you, too."

Mary got her lower lip between her teeth, bent down and began to take off Quimp's shirt. Jerry helped her, tore the shirt up into strips and they bandaged Quimp's wound while Dutch parked his gross, ugly bulk on the running board and watched.

Quimp was beginning to show signs of life, and moaned when they lifted him into the rear of the car. Dutch got Jerry's canteen off the pile of groceries, took a long, gurgling drink out of it and draped the strap over his shoulder. He belched noisily, wiped his wet, blubbery lips with his sleeve.

"Let's get going," he grunted.

"But what about Quimp?" Mary asked.

Dutch shrugged, said callously, "He'll keep. Do him good to stew in his own juice for a while. Maybe he'll learn to keep his lip buttoned."

JERRY said nothing, turned and set off up the gully with the girl at his shoulder and Dutch a few paces to the rear. They climbed out of it, headed in a beeline for the hills. A silence as heavy as the oppressive heat fell between them, and for a while the only sound was the dry scuff of shoe leather on sand and rocks.

Jerry set as rapid a pace as the girl could stand, and nodded his satisfaction when after an hour or so of steady trudging, he heard Dutch begin to mutter and curse under his breath and tap the canteen at frequent intervals, until he emptied it and flung it violently away.

They entered a sandy tableland that preceded the gradual rise to the hills, and the going got really heavy. Dutch's mutterings grew louder, and finally he said angrily, explosively:

"Jeez, slow down, will you? My legs are killing me."

Jerry motioned to a big rock outcropping up ahead.

"Looks like there might be a little shade up there," he said succinctly.

They found the slice of shade very meager. Dutch sighed gustily, eased his gross bulk down and squatted like a toad on his hunkers, with nothing moving but his little licorice-drop eyes.

There was silence for a space of minutes, with the girl leaning against the rock and Jerry a bit beyond her, near its end. Then Dutch stirred, swiveled his head around and said:

"You're a pretty smart ginzo, ain't you, pal?"

Jerry murmured, "Oh?" in an offhanded fashion that suddenly he didn't feel, because Dutch's automatic was in his big paw and his eyes had a funny look in them.

"Yah," said Dutch. "I been wondering about how that jalopy of yours stopped so sudden. There was a lot of wires hanging under the dash, and one of them was the lead wire to the ignition lock, wasn't it?"

"What if it was?" Jerry said. But his voice sounded peculiar, because his throat was suddenly constricted and as dry as sandpaper.

The gun came up slowly, and Dutch's grin was fixed, wooden.

"You worked out some kind of a dodge, and when we hit that rock you kicked the ignition wire loose. But you ain't gonna—Hey!"

The automatic went off with a whacking report and bit splinters off the rock as Jerry ducked and made a headlong dive around the end of it. Then Dutch was on his feet, lumbering after him, and Mary was screaming in a high-pitched, terrified falsetto.

DODGING and weaving like a jackrabbit with a hound after it, Jerry circled the rock in a wide arc. Dutch cut in close, came on at a dead run, bellowing curses. Suddenly he wasn't running any more because his feet had broken through a flaky crust that looked like solid ground and he was trapped to the knees in a black, viscous goo that oozed up, tenacious, clutching.

Roaring like a gorilla impaled on a spear, he tried to wade out of it and only sank the deeper. In a wild panic he dropped the gun, stretched his gross body toward the hard earth at the edge of the sinkhole, and his desperately clawing fingers raked deep gouges in the crust. His terror broke its bonds, then, burst from him in a ghastly shriek.

"Gawdamighty!" he screamed. "Get me out of here! Get me out of here, I tell you!"

Jerry had made the end of the outcropping, and was peering around the edge of it.

"The gun!" he said sharply. "You've still got Quimp's gun, Dutch. Toss it out on the sand!"

Dutch was up to his hips by now, and sinking faster by the watch-tick. Dipping a muddy paw into his pocket, he tore out cloth and all in his frenzied, panting haste to get the gun free and threw it wildly from him.

Mary had been watching from the other end of the rock and came out as Jerry dashed forward, unbuckling his belt. He made a loop of it, motioned her to hang on with him and they knelt on the hard edge of the sinkhole, flipped the loop out and Dutch froze to it with desperate, clawed fingers.

Heaving and pulling, they worked him over to the edge, and then he got one wet, slime-covered leg clear, got it up on solid ground and hauled the other free, rolled over twice and lay with his arms outflung, babbling an incoherent, frenzied gibberish.

He made no protest when Jerry used the belt to truss his hands behind him. Jerry retrieved Quimp's gun, knocked the sand from it and grinned at the girl.

"Midtown's going to be in for something of a surprise when we roll down the main street with this big slab of beef and his pal."

She shuddered and said, "That sinkhole. What a horrible trap!"

Jerry nodded soberly. "It's really a spring, but the sun evaporates the water as fast as it comes up and makes a crust that looks like solid ground until you step on it. I discovered it while I was prospecting through here before the war."

"Then Dutch was right when he accused you of kicking that ignition wire loose."

"He nearly had me there," Jerry admitted. "The guy was smarter than I figured." And added as an afterthought, "Too smart for his own good."

"Dolly Valdez Is Dead! Three Nights Ago I Dream of Her, in the Coffin, Covered With Hibiscus. I Know She Is Dead!"

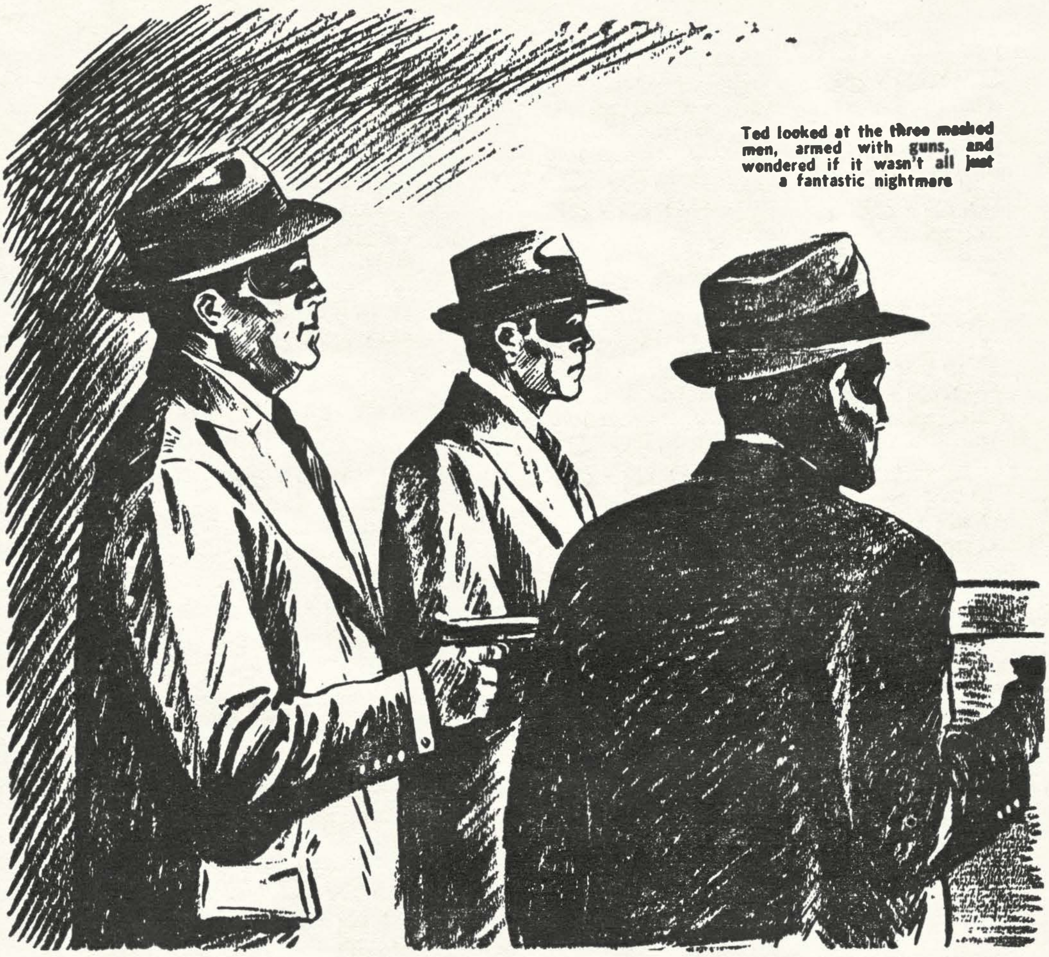
Frantically, the woman known as Kaipapu conveyed this information to Sandy McKane. She insisted that her dream was proof positive.

"I'm looking all over Honolulu for Dolly Valdez," said Sandy. "I can't make a report based on your visions! I have to be sure."

Kaipapu shrugged. "You will find her dead."

And, a few hours later, Sandy McKane did find Dolly dead. He awoke in a strange room—he didn't know how he ever got there or what had caused him to fall asleep—and the body of Dolly Valdez, her face mottled and purplish, was in the room with him! She had a flower in her hand, a five-petaled flower—a hibiscus!

When the police came along, Sandy was under the suspicion of murder. But clearing himself of the murder frame was only one of the tasks Sandy McKane faced in HIBISCUS AND HOMICIDE—the baffling complete mystery novel by William Campbell Gault which is headlined in our next issue. It's a humdinger of a yarn packed with suspense, surprises and action!



Ted looked at the three masked men, armed with guns, and wondered if it wasn't all just a fantastic nightmare

An Exciting Novelet

THE THREE

CHAPTER I

Knife in His Back

TED BIXBY opened his eyes and blinked, sleepily, incredulously. The lamp on his bedside stand had been turned on. He certainly hadn't left it on.

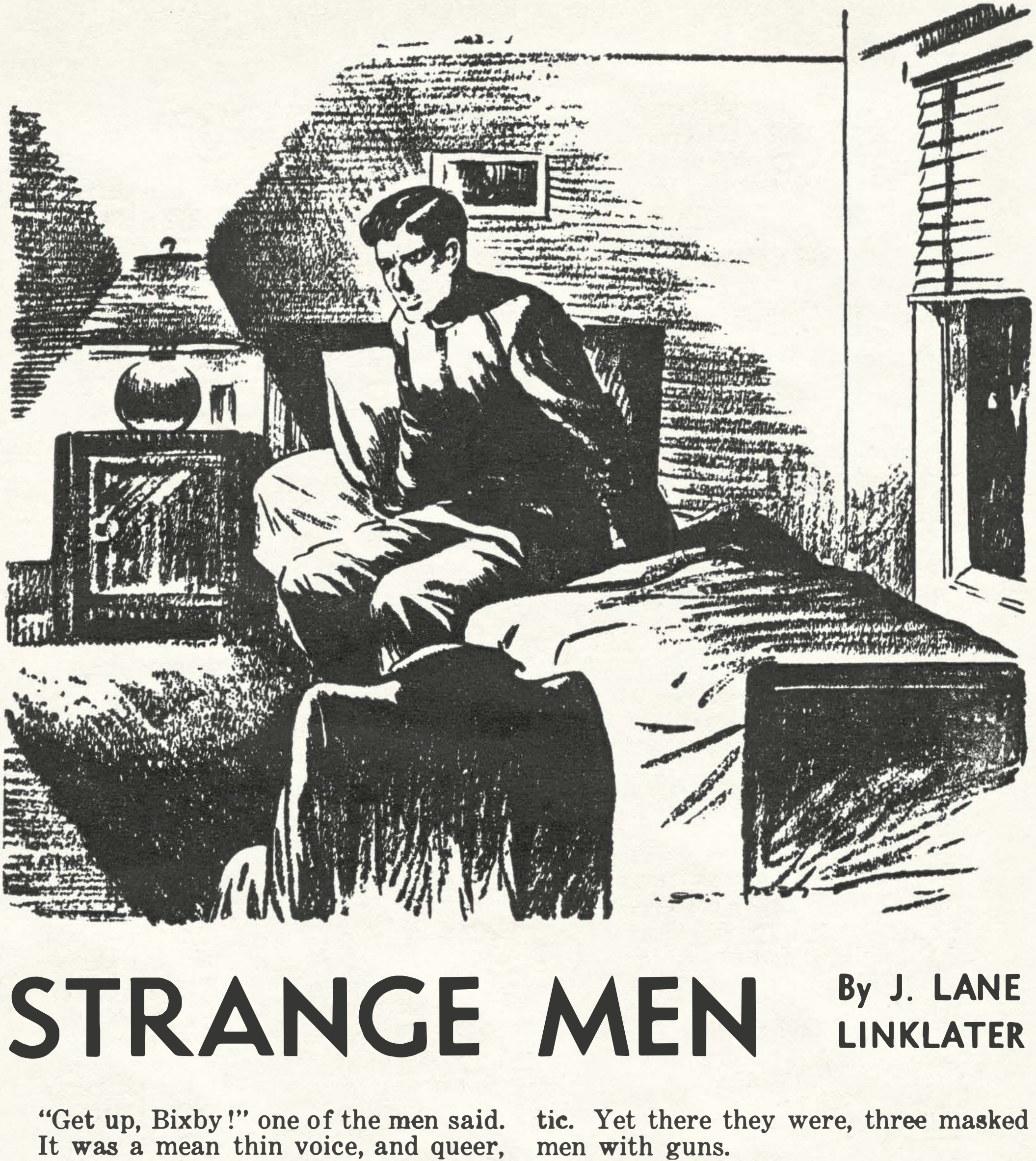
He put out a hand to snap the light off. But he changed his mind. There were three men back in the shadows of the hotel room. He counted them. Three of them. They stood there, silent. They all wore long topcoats.

Ted stared in disbelief. He must be in the middle of a nightmare. He shuddered, stared more intently. No, there they were!

And each of them was holding a gun.

Ted frowned. "What goes on?" he said loudly.

Ted Bixby Must Ferret Out a Killer in



STRANGE MEN

By J. LANE LINKLATER

"Get up, Bixby!" one of the men said.

It was a mean thin voice, and queer, and would be difficult to identify later. Ted peered at where the voice had come from. The trouble with the voice, he realized now, was that it had come through the back of the fellow's throat and out his nose.

Ted flipped the covers off and swung around. He sat groggily on the edge of the bed. This, he thought, was fantastic. Yet there they were, three masked men with guns.

"What's the idea?" he grumbled.

"Get your clothes on, Bixby. And pack your suitcases."

"Why?"

"You're leaving town!"

Ted removed his pajama coat. "What for?"

"That's what we do to trouble-makers—help them leave town," the voice said.

a Hurry—or Else Take the Rap Himself!

"And you'd better not come back!"

"But I haven't made any trouble," Ted protested. "You've got the wrong guy! I'm not mad at anybody."

"Hurry!" said the voice, sharply.

So Ted hurried, and smirked a little. It reminded him of the time he had been a prisoner of the Japs for a few hours. Those Japs had told him what to do, and he had done it so very obediently—until the chance came to bust loose.

And he'd do as he was told now. But he didn't want to leave town. He liked this little southern California city of Puloso—liked it very much. After his release from the army, he had driven all over the country, just looking for the spot that had everything he wanted. And this was it. Especially, it had Anne Meeder, the girl who operated the Puloso *Cantino.*

BY NOW Ted was dressed. He stood straight. He was tall and flexible, like a narrow tree trunk. His boyish face was shaded by an exorbitant growth of brown hair. His lankiness gave the impression of frailty, but his arms were long and his hands powerful. He threw clothes into two suitcases.

"One of us," said the voice, "will walk ahead of you. You follow him. The other two will walk behind you. Any funny business will get you a bullet in the back."

"You guys are regular comedians," said Ted.

But there was no comedy about it. It was no trouble getting out of the hotel. Ted's door opened on a balcony overlooking an inside patio. They simply walked along the balcony toward the back, down a stairway and out to the alley.

A car was waiting there. Another man was at the wheel. He didn't wear a topcoat, nor a mask, but his hat was pulled down low and his features were unrecognizable in the dark. They all got in and the car started eastward.

They were beyond the city limits when Ted remarked:

"You guys are crazy. How come you think I was making trouble for anyone?"

"You've been close to Al Baroni," the same voice said. "That means trouble."

"My dealings with Baroni," argued Ted, "were legitimate."

"Shut up," said the voice.

Ted sighed. They were still driving east. They had gone several miles when the car stopped by the side of the lonely road. The countryside was littered with orange groves, but in this section was barren rock-strewn land.

"This is as far as we go, Bixby," the voice said. "Remember, stay away from Puloso! Now, get out!"

Someone flung his suitcases out onto the rocks. Someone else opened a door and pushed him out.

Ted watched the car's taillights vanish into the night. He sat down on a rock and thought it over. It didn't do any good. He found some brush back from the road and hid his suitcases in it. Then he trudged back towards Puloso.

It was still dark and chilly when he reached the outskirts. He made his way cautiously into town and came to the alley back of the Puloso Cantino. Anne, he knew, arrived every morning at six, before the rest of the help, to get things ready before opening at seven.

Dawn was showing a feeble light when an old car chugged down the alley. The girl who stepped out was petite and trim and brisk. A key in her hand, she stopped as she saw Ted.

Ted grinned. "I was just wondering how a gal as pretty as you could be so smart," he said.

Her smile faded as she peered at Ted. "Something's the matter," she said soberly. "I can see that. Come in."

When they had entered the cafe kitchen she carefully locked the door. Ted sat on a stool. Anne started coffee.

"All right," she said. "What's up?"

Ted told her. She listened gravely.

"So that's it," Ted concluded. "You know this town. And, like I said, you're smart. Maybe you can explain it."

Anne poured coffee. "I can guess at part of it," she said. "There's a big battle going on here, and the town's split wide open. Feeling's running mighty high."

"What about?"

"Well, for many years Puloso has been a citrus center—orange groves all around. But during the war a few factories got started in that barren section east of town. It turned out to be a good site for factories. And now that the war is over, there's a group interested in making the factories over for peacetime production. The citrus people don't like that."

"Why?"

Anne shrugged a shapely shoulder. "They're afraid of losing control of the town. And they're worried about labor troubles. Maybe the factory people will cut in on their labor supply."

"Very interesting," Ted said, with a wry grin. "But why run *me* out of town?"

"I can only guess," Anne said. "You said one of the masked men mentioned that you were close to Al Baroni. Didn't you say that?"

"Sure." He gulped coffee. "I've talked to Baroni a lot in the last week, trying to make a deal for that alley building I wanted to use for a machine shop. Why, I talked to Baroni late last night! I happened to run into him, and he asked me to have a glass of beer with him."

ANNE nodded. "Well, although he's a real estate agent, the factory people had been using Baroni in other ways. People say he was also acting as an employment agent—inducing workers to leave the groves to work in the factories."

"So they figured I was in with Baroni on the deal?"

"That's my guess. After all, you've been in Puloso only a couple of weeks."

"Long enough to talk you into marrying me—if I live."

Anne shook her head. "You're practically a stranger. And I still can't understand how I let you—"

A banging on the front door interrupted her. They were very quiet. Then Anne indicated a corner behind the range, and Ted moved there, out of sight. Anne stepped into the diningroom, closing the kitchen door behind her. Presently voices came to Ted, vaguely. In a little while there was silence again. Anne reappeared, her pertly pretty face troubled.

"I was just thinking," Ted said. "I'm innocent of any law-breaking. Those guys who ran me out of town are the ones who busted the law. Why can't I just go to the police?"

"It *might* have helped," Anne said. "But you can't go to the police now."

"Why not?"

"Because the police are looking for *you!*"

Ted frowned. "What the devil!"

"Ted," said Anne, in a low voice, "Al Baroni was murdered last night about midnight!"

Ted choked. "Baroni murdered!"

"Yes. And they seem to have fixed on you as the murderer!"

"Me!" spluttered Ted. "They're loony!"

"Perhaps," Anne went on. "But that man I just talked to is a policeman, and a friend of mine. He came here to tell me because he knows about you and me."

"So!" said Ted, sourly. "I can't show myself, because if I do those thugs would bump me off. And I can't go to the police, because, if I do that, they'll nab me for murder!"

Anne smiled feebly. Her face was white. "It looks that way. You see, you were the last person seen with Baroni last night, just a few minutes before he was murdered. Later, the police went to question you at the hotel, and you had moved out without notifying the management, in the dead of night!"

"But I—I was *forced* to leave!"

"Sure. But can you prove it?"

"I guess not." Ted blinked gloomily. "Why do the cops think Baroni was murdered?"

"Robbery. Baroni usually carried large sums of money on his person. When he was found, his wallet was gone."

"The thing I'm worried about is you," Ted grumbled. "I'm bringing you trouble instead of—"

"How you do talk!" Anne stopped him with a kiss. "The thing for you to do is to get busy on your own police work."

Ted gazed at her dubiously. Anne herself, he was afraid, would want to take a hand in it. That little bundle of woman, he thought, just wouldn't trust him to go it alone.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "But I want you to stay out of it. Let me handle it. Okay?"

"Of course," she said sweetly.

He didn't believe her, but he said: "Where do I start?"

"The first step would be to find out who those three men are," suggested Anne.

Ted grinned. "Oh, sure. You any ideas?"

"Not from your skimpy description." Anne frowned thoughtfully. "You'd better talk to Cecil Atterbury."

"Oh, him," Ted said coldly.

"Don't be like that, darling. Cecil has always been good to me. As cashier of the First National, he knows a lot of people."

"Sure. But he wouldn't advance me a loan to help me swing the deal for that building I want."

"It's the bank's money, not his. And I'm sure he'll help you with this, for my sake."

"That's what I don't like."

"Shush, darling!" Anne smiled. "You've got to identify those three men. Cecil knows everybody in Puloso. Better go to his house before he leaves for the bank. About eight o'clock."

Ted got up wearily. "Okay. But I'll have to stay under cover. So I'll go to that old building on the alley that I planned to fix up as a machine shop. I have a key to that, but only Baroni knew that, and he's dead."

Anne nodded. "I'll phone Cecil to expect you but, I won't tell him it's you—only that you're a friend of mine."

At the door Ted stopped, his finger tapping his head. "I'm a heck of a detective. I don't even know where Baroni was killed."

Anne hesitated. "The policeman told me," she said. "He was killed in the alley—your alley—close to your building!"

"Neat," said Ted, sardonically. "And how was he killed?"

"A knife," said Anne. "Stabbed in the back." She hesitated again. "Please don't let this get you, darling, but—well, it was one of my kitchen knives! You know, I have plenty of knives, more than I need. Some of them I keep in that drawer over there and never use. It was one of them, apparently. They knew it was my knife because they're all initialed on the haft."

Ted drew a long breath. "It ain't possible," he said.

"What isn't possible?"

"All this evidence against me. Even the knife. They know you wouldn't kill anyone, but they figure I was at home here in the kitchen and could easily have slipped it out."

"You quit fussing and go find those three masked men!" Anne said sternly.

"Okay, lovely," Ted said hurriedly. "But you stay out of it! Just let me handle this!"

CHAPTER II

A MATTER OF IDENTIFICATION

STANDING at the foot of the alley was an old frame structure which Ted had expected to renovate for his business. He let himself in a side door. So far he had done nothing to fix it up, since the deal was still unsettled, due to lack of money.

Ted squatted in the gloomy partitioned-off office and pondered his problem. He tried especially to fix in his mind the geography of this section of town. He recalled meeting Baroni along toward midnight on Puloso Avenue. This was a main street that ran north and south. Baroni had invited Ted into a beer parlor for a drink. When they left the beer parlor, Ted had turned south to go to his hotel. Baroni had gone north, on his way home.

Just above the beer parlor, Ted knew, this alley branched off diagonally from Puloso Avenue. It made a triangle of one corner of the block. So apparently Baroni, instead of walking straight up Puloso Avenue, had turned up the alley, taking him directly past Ted's building. But why? Why, especially, would a man like Baroni, with a lot of money on him, choose a dark alley rather than the main thoroughfare?

One other thought occurred to Ted. Running east and west, forming an intersection with Puloso Avenue about fifty yards north of the beer parlor, was a cross-country highway. There was a bus station near that intersection, a little to the east. Before eight o'clock

Ted set out for Cecil Atterbury's house.

It was a nice house, very trim and neat. It was even spotlessly clean around the back door, except for the three cement steps. There were brownish stains all over those steps. Ted, standing on them, thought it would make things easier if the stains were blood. But he knew they weren't blood at all.

He knocked discreetly at the door. It was opened by Cecil Atterbury, cashier of the First National Bank, who was wearing a flowing morning robe. Atterbury stared at Ted in a worried fashion.

"So it's you Anne wanted me to see," he grumbled. "I don't think I like this. A man wanted for murder is a dangerous person to have around."

"It was Anne's idea," Ted said unpleasantly.

"Yes. Oh, well. Come in."

Atterbury, a bachelor, was evidently alone in the house. Ted studied him as he poured coffee. He talked like an old fogey, but actually he was youngish, under forty. Not bad-looking, either, Ted thought. Tall, but plumpish around the middle. His face would have been distinguished but for its puffiness.

"Well, what do you want of me?" Atterbury muttered.

"Anne thought you might give me a line on the identity of the three masked men."

"Masked men! What three men?"

"The three men who ran me out of town." Ted told him the story. "I want those men! I think they're the key to the murder. They ran me out of town because they thought I was a troublemaker. They may have killed Baroni for the same reason."

"That isn't what the police think," snapped Atterbury.

"The police think it was robbery."

"And with good reason." Atterbury sipped coffee daintily. "They know that Baroni made a practise of carrying cash around with him—he never had a bank account. They woke me up an hour or so after his body was found, and I was able to tell them that Baroni probably had twenty thousand dollars on him!"

"Twenty thousand!"

"Precisely. Baroni was in the bank yesterday with a check for that sum. He wanted to cash it. Naturally, the teller wouldn't cash it without my okay. So I knew about it."

"Who gave him the check?" demanded Ted.

Atterbury shrugged. "It doesn't make any difference."

"Was it those factory people?" Ted persisted.

Atterbury stared at him. "It could be. It doesn't matter. The point is that Baroni didn't have the money when he was found."

Ted scowled. "So it *looks* like robbery. But I still want those three men!"

ATTERBURY was beginning to perspire. "How can I tell you? Your description of them is worthless!"

"Well, they kept in the dark. All I can tell you is that they were all slimmish, the shortest about five feet seven and the tallest about three inches taller. They all wore long topcoats, and cloth masks over their faces."

"Worthless," Atterbury repeated stubbornly.

"Rot!" Ted said irritably. "You're no help."

Atterbury stiffened, his dignity offended. "How can I be helpful? Anyhow, it's only for Anne's sake I would consider it. Even so, I find it difficult to square this sort of thing with my conscience. I'm not used to working against the law—"

The front door bell cut him short. Atterbury jumped in his chair. His hands fluttered. Then he silently motioned to Ted to keep still, and walked out of the kitchen.

In a moment he was back, his eyes goggling. "It's a policeman," he whispered.

"So I'll have to get out of here." Ted glared at him. "Or do you figure on turning me in?"

"No," cried Atterbury, still in a hoarse whisper. "Oh, no! Anne would never forgive me!" He thought a moment. "I'll try to check on those three men during the day. You phone me here this evening at nine o'clock."

"Okay."

"You mustn't be seen leaving here," Atterbury ran on fearfully. "It would be ruinous! Now, I'll go to my front door. You wait until I get there. Then you leave by this back door. Slam the door just loud enough for me to hear."

"Okay," said Ted. "Get going."

Cecil Atterbury, with a sigh of despair, toddled off. Ted waited a few seconds. Then he opened the back door. He banged the door shut again with a subdued slam. But he did not go out. Ted had noticed a partly open door just off the kitchen—a large broom closet. He edged into it, leaving the door slightly ajar. He was in the middle of a confusion of brooms, mops and buckets.

Atterbury had admitted the officer, for Ted could hear voices in the living room. He listened intently.

"On that murder," the officer was saying. "Nothing much new yet. It's a cinch that new guy in town, that Ted Bixby, is the killer. Looks like he's left town. He won't get far, though."

"Good," Atterbury said nervously. "Very good."

Ted, sitting on an upturned bucket in the closet, grinned at a mop.

"About that dough, sir," the officer said. "That twenty thousand bucks. It was in large bills?"

"Yes. In thousand-dollar bills. Very few people ever call for them, of course. Baroni was one of the few. In large deals, he always called for thousand-dollar bills." Atterbury was silent a moment. "I can get you a list of the numbers, if you'll call at the bank about ten o'clock. Better ask for me personally."

"Thanks a lot, sir," the officer said respectfully.

The front door clicked shut. There were no more voices. In a little while Atterbury was back in the kitchen, muttering to himself. Ted heard him gulp coffee and clatter the cup back into the saucer. Then his heavy steps padded out of the kitchen again.

And again, Atterbury's voice broke the silence. He was at the telephone. His voice was low, but his words were audible.

"Mrs. Anders?" Ted heard him say. "Is Bill there?"

There was a wait, and then Atterbury said: "Bill? This is Cecil . . . Yes. Say, Bill, did you chaps run that Bixby fellow out of town last night? . . . No, I'm not criticizing. It's none of my business, but this thing about Baroni may complicate matters . . . No, no, Bill, I'm not accusing you—or anybody. I only want to warn you . . . All right, all right . . . But how did you happen to pick last night . . . oh, Frank Lowe tipped you off, eh? . . . But are you sure you can trust him? . . . Well, I suppose so . . . Yes. Good-by."

Ted, listening excitedly, heard the telephone click back into place. Atterbury was roaming the house again, apparently getting dressed. Ted sat noiselessly.

Then Atterbury came back and tried the kitchen door. He tromped through the house. The front door banged shut.

TED waited in the silent house for fifteen minutes. He emerged from the closet, grinning wryly. Obviously, he had the house to himself now. Atterbury had left for the sacred precincts of his bank.

There was coffee left in the big silver percolator. Ted connected it, warmed it up. He poured himself a cup, dawdled over it. So, he reflected, Atterbury knew quite well who those three men were! And one of them was a fellow named Bill Anders.

Ted loafed pleasantly in Cecil Atterbury's kitchen for an hour. He strolled through the house then, and stopped in a small study. The phone was here. He found William Anders. He called the number. A woman's voice answered.

"Mrs. Anders?" Ted said. "Is Bill there?"

"No," said the woman. "He went out. Who's calling?"

Ted thought up a couple of names in a hurry. "Harry Lowden," he said. "I want to see Bill about last night."

The woman sounded tired, and puzzled. "What about last night, Mr. Lowden?"

"Well, it was pretty late when Bill went home," Ted said tentatively, with his tongue in one cheek.

"I'll say it was late," Mrs. Anders said tartly.

"Sure. So when Bill drove home with Vern Miller—"

"Who?" cut in the woman.

"Vern Miller."

Mrs. Anders, was annoyed. "Mr. Lowden, I don't believe I ever heard of you," she said. "And I don't know any Vern Miller. Bill came home last night with Perry Mains. Anyhow, Perry was in the car with him. Frank Lowe was driving, and what Bill was doing with that Lowe I can't say."

"Thank you," Ted said softly. "Sorry I troubled you."

He hung up quickly. Bill Anders was going to have to do a little explaining when he got home, evidently. Anyhow, this had come easier than Ted had expected.

He had, he was pretty sure, the names of two of those three men: Bill Anders and Perry Mains.

And the name of the man who drove the car. Frank Lowe. But who was Frank Lowe?

TED reached for the phone and called the Puloso Cantino. Anne's voice sounded very brisk.

"This is the Jean Valjean of Puloso," Ted said. "I love you, darling!"

"Where are you calling from?" Anne said severely.

"Your pal's house. But he isn't here. And he doesn't know *I'm* here. But I'm learning things. A guy named Frank Lowe drove that car last night. Know him?"

"Of course. He comes in here all the time. In fact, he's here right now!"

"Good grief! Can he hear us?"

"Of course not, you dope. I'm on the kitchen phone. The man you mentioned is in the dining room." Anne lowered her voice. "He's not a nice man, darling. He hangs around the beer parlors and does any sort of an odd job that doesn't call for hard labor."

"Ah," breathed Ted. "I want to meet Frank Lowe."

"Why?"

"Well, for one thing, I've been looking for three men like you told me to. But it doesn't take three men to stick a knife in a guy's back. That's a one-man job, my lovely."

"I wouldn't put it past him. But are you sure?"

"Can't say as I am," Ted conceded. "But I also heard that Lowe tipped off those three men last night."

"Tipped them off! To what?"

Ted chuckled. "I think he tipped them off that last night was the time to give me the bum's rush. So I want to see him."

"When and where?" Anne said promptly.

"Eight o'clock this evening at the northeast corner of the city park. I think I can get there without being seen."

"It's practically done. Frank Lowe has been wanting to meet me in the park, and in the dark, for quite a long time."

"I'll moider dat bum," growled Ted.

"Okay. Did you get any help from Cecil?"

Ted laughed. "Some. But he didn't know it."

"Be careful, darling," Anne said anxiously. "The whole town is on the lookout for you now."

"Nice of them," Ted said. "But *you* stay out of this. Let me handle it!"

HE PUSHED the instrument away from him across the desk. He knew now who had driven that car. And he knew the names of two of the three men in it. But he was not happy about it.

That there was a connection between his getting run out of town and the murder of Baroni seemed obvious, but where was the thread that joined the two events?

Ted leaned back in Atterbury's chair and yawned. Then he heard something in the adjoining room—the living room. Just a faint rustle. Ted straightened tensely.

Perhaps, he thought, the woman who did the housework for Atterbury had come in quietly.

There was no more noise.

Ted got up, very cautiously. A mere house-keeper shouldn't give him much trouble, but he'd rather not be seen at all. And he certainly didn't want to hurt a woman. He crept toward the half open door.

He pushed the door open just a little wider.

Well, there it was. It wasn't a woman. It was a man.

And the man, watching him intently, had a gun.

CHAPTER III

CROSS CURRENTS

A QUICK glance showed Ted the man was about five feet nine, and slimmish. He had a narrow face and the smile on it was lop-sided and touched with desperation. Ted didn't know him, but something about the way he stood made it certain that here was one of the three!

His thin lips moved. "Keep your hands in sight, Bixby!"

Ted grinned. "Okay. But be careful with that gun."

The man was obviously no gunman and Ted was worried about that nervous trigger finger. "Just get back in that room," said the man.

He followed warily as Ted backed into the study. Ted moved slowly. He suddenly reversed his motion. He lunged forward. His left hand came up under the man's right wrist and he pushed it up. The gun exploded and the bullet slammed into the ceiling. Ted's right hand, tightly doubled, pistoned into the man's middle and he groaned and went down.

Ted helped himself to the gun. He looked down at the man. "What's your name?" he asked.

No words came—only a deeper groan.

Ted got down and ran his hand through the man's pockets. There were letters and cards. The man's name was Justus Greene. So, thought Ted, the three men who had tried to remove him from Puloso were Bill Anders, Perry Mains and this Justus Greene. Yet he didn't feel elated. No evidence on the murder yet.

Greene was breathing a little easier. He was propped up on one elbow, and Ted crouched down beside him.

"You didn't expect to find me here, did you?" Ted said.

"No."

"Then what are you doing here in Atterbury's house?"

Greene moaned and sighed. He kept glancing furtively at the gun.

"I just came in to use the phone," he said.

"The phone? But why use Atterbury's phone?"

"I was afraid to use an office phone, or my home phone, or even a public booth. So I asked Atterbury if I could come in and use his. He said okay and lent me his door key."

"Nice of him," Ted said. "Who were you going to phone to?"

"A couple of other fellows." Greene's color was a little better now. He wasn't quite so scared. "You won't shoot me—you wouldn't dare. I'm not talking any more."

Ted grinned. Greene was right. He could use the gun for protection, but not to force information out of anybody. Anyhow, it was odds on that Greene had been going to phone to the other two men, Anders and Mains.

"There's a murder rap facing you," Ted said casually.

"It's facing you, not me!" snapped Greene.

"Don't be too sure," said Ted. "And that fellow who drove the car for you, Frank Lowe, is a bad one. For twenty thousand bucks he might kill a man. He tipped you off that last night was a good time to run me out of town, didn't he?"

"Yes." Greene said sullenly.

"You'd had him keeping an eye on me, and also on Baroni?"

"Yes."

In his excitement, Ted wiggled the gun under Greene's nose. "So he phoned you, and you phoned the others?"

"Yes."

"What time did Frank Lowe phone you?" Ted asked.

Greene's head drooped wearily. "It was nearly one o'clock."

"Nearly one o'clock, eh?" Ted brushed the end of Greene's nose with the gun. "So why did Frank Lowe wait an hour to phone you about me?"

"An hour?"

"Yes. It was just before midnight when I left Baroni. Lowe didn't phone you until an hour later. Why?"

"I don't know," whined Greene. "Does there have to be a reason?"

"Ther sure as blazes does, pal," muttered Ted. But he didn't believe he could get any more out of this fellow. He said sharply: "Get up and get out!"

Greene scrambled to his feet. He

seemed astonished that he was being released. He almost ran out of the study and through the living room and out of the front door.

Ted didn't wait, either. He sneaked back to his building on the alley.

IT WAS getting dark by seven o'clock in the evening. Ted recalled that he had promised to phone to Atterbury at nine o'clock. And he had arranged, through Anne, to meet Frank Lowe in the park an hour before that. But there was one angle that still troubled him. Why did Baroni go up the alley instead of walking straight up Puloso Avenue on his way home?

Ted reflected again that Puloso Avenue was intersected, just north of the beer parlor. And that the bus station, which was on the highway just off Puloso Avenue, was the only spot in the vicinity which was active late at night.

From the alley he had a fair chance of approaching the bus station unobserved. The station building included an office and waiting room. Attached to it was a small freight warehouse. Ted neared it from the warehouse side. The big doors at the end were open. Ted cautiously peered into the dimly-lighted interior. He was playing in luck, for once. Squatting on a box was the one man who might help him.

He entered quietly. The man on the box glanced up.

"For cripes sake!" he said. "Where'd you come from?"

Ted hushed him. This was Shorty Blaine. Ted knew Shorty, had made a point of cultivating him. Shorty was a town character. He was as thick as a barrel, and a little queer in the head. He was, however, very industrious, and the station agent was glad to have him for odd jobs.

"The police are after me," Ted warned.

"I know," growled Shorty. And Ted grinned. He knew that Shorty did not like policemen. That was because the local officers made a practise of teasing him. "Them bums!" Shorty snarled. "They been looking for you all day!"

"But maybe you can help me out-fox 'em," Ted said.

Shorty beamed. "I can? Cripes!"

"Yes. You were around here last night?"

"Until two in the morning," Shorty said.

"Were you in here or outside?"

"Outside, mostly. It was warm."

"What I want to know is, did you happen to see three men hanging around near the intersection, just over there?"

Shorty scratched his bulging forehead. Then he chuckled. "I sure did! Three of 'em! They was hanging around there for most an hour, I guess!"

"Shorty, you're beautiful! Do you remember the time?"

Shorty gave it a little thought. "I first seen 'em there," he said, "about fifteen or twenty to twelve. They just sorta hung around until nearly twelve thirty."

"Ah," said Ted. "And what did they do then?"

"Do! Why, they got on the bus!"

Ted gasped. "They did what?"

"They got on the west-bound bus for Los Angeles!"

"Oh. no, Shorty! No! They couldn't have done that."

"But they sure did," Shorty said, his feelings hurt.

"What would three orange growers want to get on the Los Angeles bus for?" demanded Ted, in amazement. "And how did they get back in time?"

"Orange growers, bunk!" cut in Shorty. "Them was no orange growers! Them was three guys that's been working in a factory!"

Ted groaned. Here were three *more* men, but apparently the wrong men! It didn't seem likely that three ex-factory workers would have anything to do with the Baroni murder. Yet why would they hang around at the head of Puloso Avenue for so long when they should normally have been sitting comfortably in the waiting room?

"You knew those three guys, Shorty?"

"Sure. I seen 'em around different times, and I talked to all of 'em."

That was right, Ted reflected. Shorty talked to everybody, and he was as curious as a kid about their plans.

"Who were they, Shorty?"

"Why, they was three guys that had got laid off from the factory. A couple of 'em was going into Los Angeles and take a train from there to some place back east. A lot of 'em are doing that now."

"A couple of 'em! How about the third one?"

"Oh, he's got another job here. He was just going into Los Angeles and then coming back. He's due back this evening on the nine-eighteen."

TED'S forehead knotted in a frown. Then he tapped his head with his forefinger, as if tapping an idea into motion.

"Shorty, I want to see the one that's coming back," he said.

Shorty grinned eagerly. "It gives you an idea, huh?"

"Just half an idea, Shorty. Yes, if that guy steps off the bus, you hold him here if you can, eh?"

Shorty was very pleased. "Just leave it to me!"

Ted crossed vacant lots to the city park. Trees were scattered about on an expanse of grass. Under the trees were benches. Ted selected a bench in a deep shadow. He had a hunch that Frank Lowe would be here in good time. Why not? He thought he had a date with Anne!

Ted thought uneasily about Anne. He was still afraid she'd try to take a hand in things. He was a little surprised that he had seen no sign of her all day.

Lowe came presently. Ted could see the fellow strutting up the street and turning into the park, a heavy-shouldered man of middle height. Lowe sat on a bench near the edge of the park and stretched contentedly.

Ted trod softly across the grass and slid onto the bench beside him.

"Nice evening," Ted said pleasantly.

Lowe grunted, annoyed at the interruption. Then he turned quickly and stared at Ted, incredulously.

"You!" he croaked hoarsely. "What the devil!"

"Makes me feel awful to disappoint you, pal." Ted was full of sympathy.

Lowe was no longer startled. He was only sore. His broad red face colored angrily. He started to get up.

"Sit," Ted said sharply.

Lowe looked at him and saw the gun in Ted's hand, the gun Ted had taken from Greene. He wasn't much scared, but he settled back onto the bench again.

"Okay," he said, in a bored voice. "Come on with it."

"Last night you drove me out of town," Ted said. "You had been watching me, and Baroni, for those three orange growers. You phoned Greene to get his gang and call on me at the hotel. That was about one o'clock, a full hour after I left Baroni. What were you doing in that hour?"

Lowe's jaws were working methodically. He spat on the grass. He said nothing. Ted, watching him, scowled. The trouble was, Lowe wasn't scared. He wasn't even a little worried.

"Think it over, chum," Ted said quietly. "Grabbing me like that was kidnaping! A major crime! You're feeling safe because three prominent men are tied up with you. But you're wrong, laddie! Dead wrong!"

Lowe spat again and inclined his head.

"Those three guys are amateurs in crime," Ted urged. "They got boiled up over the labor trouble, and someone got 'em sore at me, made 'em think I was a secret trouble-maker. So they ran me out of town—committed a crime.

"But they're no criminals. They're worried as the devil right now! They just can't afford to get tangled up in a kidnaping charge." Ted prodded Lowe gently with the gun. "At the first sign of trouble, chum, they'll unload on you!"

Lowe's jaws stopped. "They can't do that."

"With their drag they could do it easily," Ted insisted. "And there's only one guy who could help you!"

Lowe stared at the tree tops. "You, huh?"

"Me."

"So?"

"So," said Ted, "I want you should tell me what you were doing between midnight and one o'clock."

Lowe's jaws started moving again. His jaws stopped. He spat at least fifteen feet. The jaws shifted gears. Then he got up, and walked away.

Ted sat there, nursing the gun. The gun was no good. He knew quite well he couldn't stop Lowe from walking away. He watched him swing jauntily away into the darkness. . . .

CHAPTER IV

Hidden Killer

REMEMBERING that the beer parlor had a rear door, which he had used before, Ted waited in the alley outside, where he could peer in and see the clock over the bar.

He waited until two minutes to nine. Then he slipped in and entered the phone booth, which was against the back wall. He left the door slightly open, so that the booth's overhead light did not go on. He dialed a number. Cecil Atterbury responded very promptly.

"Oh, it's you," he grumbled.

"Yes," Ted said. "You told me to call at nine o'clock. I don't think you can do me any good, though. I already know the names of those three men."

"So I assumed from what I've heard," Atterbury said tartly. "I don't like it, Bixby. I gave you permission to use my house but not to abuse the privilege."

Ted grinned. "Okay. So I won't bother you. I'll just tell Anne you couldn't help me."

"I didn't say that," barked Atterbury. "Indeed, against my better judgment, I think I *can* help you!"

"For Anne's sake, eh?"

"Frankly, yes."

"Too bad you couldn't accept my note at the bank for Anne's sake, too," jibed Ted.

"That was purely business," argued Atterbury. "I resent your implications."

"Okay. What do I do?"

"It may be dangerous," Atterbury warned. "You have a gun?"

"Sure. I took it away from Greene."

"Very good." Atterbury's voice lowered. "Listen carefully. Those three men are going to meet in half an hour!"

"So?"

"Yes." Ted could hear Atterbury's loud sigh. "I feel like a criminal, passing this information on to you. These men are my friends. Because they trust me, they talk freely in front of me. That's how I know."

"But," Ted suggested slyly, "for Anne's sake—"

"Yes, yes," Atterbury said hurriedly, nervously. "Well, Anders, Mains and Greene will meet in the office of the Puloso District Packing House. That's a few blacks north on Puloso Avenue. No doubt they'll discuss the situation in full. If you listen in on them, you should get the whole story!"

"How do I listen in?" Ted said.

"Very simple. There's a small door on the south side. You go in there. The packing house will be almost dark. You cross to the office, which is in the northeast corner."

"Will I be able to hear what goes on in the office?"

"The partition on the west side of the office is flimsy," Atterbury said. "A board about five feet off the ground is loose. They won't know about that, but you can listen in."

"How do you know about the board?" queried Ted.

"Because I fixed it for you, blast you!" Atterbury's voice was almost a shriek.

Ted laughed softly. "You'd do most anything for Anne, wouldn't you? Is that all?"

"What more do you want, you ungrateful lout?" Atterbury said testily. "I've put myself in a very risky position."

"Thank you so much," Ted said, and hung up.

It was twenty after nine when Ted reached the bus station. The 9:18 bus had just passed through. Ted approached the warehouse entrance warily. He was keyed up with expectation, but none too sure of himself.

Shorty was watching for him just inside the warehouse door.

"He's here!" Shorty whispered excitedly. "I nabbed him! He's a-sitting on a bundle just behind that pile of boxes."

Ted twigged Shorty's ear and moved silently into the warehouse. He vanished behind the pile of boxes. When he emerged again, a few minutes later, his youthful face was set grimly.

"Did you find out somep'n?" Shorty

asked anxiously.

"Plenty," Ted said, and slapped Shorty on the back.

"Then we can out-fox them danged cops," exulted Shorty.

Ted hurried out and headed in the direction of the Puloso District Packing House. It would be better, he thought, if he had appealed at once to the police, but, under the circumstances, he carried no weight with them. He'd have to go it alone.

THE packing house was a low frame building covering almost a block. Ted stopped across the street from that small door on the south side. He watched it for a little while. There was absolute stillness around that door. Ted wondered why it wasn't locked.

The graveled road was narrow. Ted trod across it toward the door, his feet scuffling pebbles. He reached the door, hesitated, turned the knob and pushed. Inside, the light was dim, just enough to show him the way across to the office in the far corner. He glanced across at the high sorting tables, and the conveyor belts that sprawled unevenly across the expanse of board floor. It was a little ghostly, and very quiet.

Those three men, no doubt, were in that office beyond, but the sound of their voices did not reach him.

Ted closed the door softly and moved across the floor in the direction of the office. He had gone about half way when he stopped. He didn't know just why he had stopped.

Just ahead of him three rows of orange crates jutted out in his path. He would have to pass them, and over the first row hung a solitary light globe, making that spot much brighter than elsewhere. Ted shrugged; he'd have to go on. He moved forward. He had reached the first row of crates.

"Stop right there, Bixby!" a low voice said. "I've got you covered, and I couldn't miss!"

Ted halted. The voice came from just beyond the next row of crates. He could see the glitter of the gun as it rested on the top crate, chest high. Beyond the gun he could see the desperate glitter in the gray eyes of Cecil Atterbury.

"I certainly walked right into this!" Ted said glumly.

"You shouldn't be so trusting," Atterbury chided him.

"Oh, I was suspicious, all right. I just didn't foresee this angle.

"Never mind your state of mind." Atterbury's low voice was urgent. "There's a piece of paper on top of the crate at your elbow. Pick it up and put it in your pocket."

Ted turned his head. He peered at the piece of paper. It was a $1,000 bill. It was lying quite flat, as if it had been carefully smoothed out.

It was clear, Ted thought, why Atterbury wanted him to pick it up and put it in his pocket. The police could find fingerprints on such pieces of paper. Atterbury, of course, had wiped his own prints off the bill, but he wanted Ted's prints on it. Ted made no effort to pick it up.

Once that bill was in his pocket, that gun would blast the life out of him.

That was all Atterbury needed, those prints on the bill. He had a perfect set-up. He could say he was on his way to join his friends in the office when Ted intercepted him. He could explain that Ted had this $1,000 bill, having left the rest of the money in hiding, and had demanded that Atterbury change it for bills of smaller denomination.

He could also say that Ted had threatened him with a gun. Ted recalled that Atterbury had pointedly asked him, on the phone, if he had a gun. So all Atterbury had to do, after Ted had lifted that $1,000 bill, was to shoot him, and then slip Ted's gun out of his pocket and drop it on the floor.

Ted grinned feebly. "Everything worked out good for you, didn't it?" He was just stalling. "Like now. You can bump me off and be as safe as a dollar."

"It was all right before," Atterbury said stiffly.

"Oh, I know that. You wanted to run me out of town, on account of Anne, and you wanted to kill Baroni, on account of the money. The two worked together in a very sweet way."

"Yes." Atterbury wanted to listen to Ted, just to see how much he knew, but he was also in a fever to get it over with. "So just pick up—"

ELOQUENTLY Ted pushed up one shoulder in a helpless shrug. "Sure. What can I do? You're pretty smart, stopping me just before I could do you any damage. I had things figured out.

"Yes, sir. You decided to get rid of me, for Anne's sake. My acquaintanceship with Baroni gave you that chance. You knew all about the squabble between the citrus people and the factory people. You knew Frank Lowe was lookout man for those three idiots, and you hired Lowe secretly to work for you!

"So Lowe got 'em worked up about me, and in the mood to heave me out of town. And just then along comes Baroni and cashes a check at your bank for twenty thousand.

"Well, I don't know why—maybe speculations, maybe the horses—but you needed that dough. And you saw a chance to kill Baroni, lift his roll, and stick me with the murder rap!"

Atterbury's voice was tense: "Pick up that money!"

"Sure, sure." Ted was still stalling, buying time with words. He knew Atterbury would kill him, even if he never touched the bill, he could do nothing else, but Atterbury wanted desperately to get Ted's prints on it. "You were watching Baroni yourself last night. You knew his habits. You saw him go in the beer parlor with me.

"It was late, hardly anybody on the street. You wanted to get Baroni to walk up that alley, past my building. You did a slick thing. You knew there were several men half a block away, waiting for the west-bound bus. Most of them were leaving Puloso for good, would probably never be heard from again. And so you hired three of them, gave 'em ten bucks apiece, just to hang around at the intersection."

"You—you found out about that?" stuttered Atterbury.

"Indeed, yes. As an excuse, you told them you wanted them to watch out for a man you were anxious to find. You gave them a description that fitted no one.

"The trick was obvious. Knowing Baroni, you figured that when he came out of the beer parlor and saw those three strange men loitering at the head of the street, and him with all that dough on him, he'd just avoid them by cutting up the alley!"

"Well, of course, that's speculation."

"And you were waiting for him, with a knife you had taken out of Anne's kitchen. You knifed Baroni, made off with the swag, which you hid—I don't know where. But that accounts for the hour that Frank Lowe waited before phoning to Greene.

"Yes, sir. Lowe had to wait for you, while you got rid of the loot, as he had to check with you before passing the word on to those orange growers that now was the time to deal with Ted Bixby!

"So he waited for you! Where? Where else but on your back steps! Lowe is the kind of tobacco chewer who would desecrate the portals of heaven itself! So he waited for you long enough to leave stains all over your back steps!"

"I already know what he did," Atterbury said sharply. "Now, pick up that paper!"

Ted stared at Atterbury's wild gray eyes. Atterbury couldn't wait any longer. Atterbury's trigger finger was getting very jumpy. The sweat on Ted's face made his skin itch. He didn't dare lift his hand to it. He made one more try at stalling.

"There's something you don't know, Atterbury. One of those three men came back. Yes, sir. He's in town now!"

This didn't help, Ted thought. Atterbury was tired of waiting. He'd shoot anyway, and take a chance on the fingerprints. He'd shoot, and then stick the bill in Ted's fingers!

"He came back, eh?" squeaked Atterbury. "Well, I can take care of him later. I'll take care of you now!"

Ted saw the gun move a little.

Then the light went out.

It was a miracle, nothing less. That light above his head just blinked out. Ted himself was motionless for a moment, utterly astonished. One second he was bathed in light, the next there just wasn't any. Darkness sheeted them.

Ted dropped low, and crouched.

AND Cecil Atterbury went mad. He made a quick sobbing noise, just beyond that row of crates. Blinding orange flashes spurted from his gun.

Shots echoed through the building. Atterbury was in a frenzy. He was firing furiously, wildly, without direction.

Ted crashed forward. His shoulder caught the pile of crates. They toppled. Ted went with them. Atterbury's yell was drowned in the clatter. Then Ted's groping hands, pushing aside broken crates, found Atterbury, searched out his throat, choked him into helplessness. . . .

THE shades were drawn and the doors locked at the Puloso Cantino at midnight. But the lights were on inside, and coffee was brewing.

"I should've known you'd dip your finger in the soup sooner or later," Ted grumbled. "I told you to keep out of it, to let me handle it. But no. At the last moment—"

"I know, darling," Anne said soothingly. "I'm just awful that way. But it was such a strain. And I'd kept out of it all day long.

"But I knew you were to phone Cecil at nine o'clock. I thought I'd just sort of watch from a distance. So I stood across the street from Cecil's house. When I saw him come out, I followed him to the packing house. I sneaked in after him, and stood back against the wall. I saw you come in later. I saw you standing 'way inside there for so long I just couldn't bear it. And, from where I was, I could see Cecil better than you could, even at that distance."

"Also, from where you were, you could turn off the main light switch!" remarked Ted.

"It seemed like the right thing to do," Anne said demurely, "at the moment."

"I'll say it was," said Ted, fervently. "I suppose Cecil figured he had to kill you, being afraid you would find out he killed Baroni," Anne said.

"More than that, my beauty. The way it was, the police had me tagged for that murder. The only way Atterbury could keep things that way was to eliminate me so I couldn't talk. And he arranged it so that, if it had worked, I would have been still further incriminated."

"Cecil certainly worked out a neat scheme."

"The only weak point in it," Ted said, "was that the police would check the serial numbers on those thousand-dollar bills. And Atterbury, being as he ran the bank himself, had a good chance to juggle those numbers."

"Poor Cecil!" murmured Anne.

"Poor Cecil my eye!" Ted growled. "The guy was a murderer—and worse!"

"What do you mean, worse?"

"He was a stuffed shirt, than which there is nothing worser." In spite of the affection in his eye, Ted stared at Anne morosely. "Anyhow I spent a lot of time looking for those three men, and what did it get me? It was your idea, but those three guys didn't do me any good at all!"

Anne smiled. "Oh, I don't know. Remember, you still have to finance that building of yours."

"I know that," Ted said gloomily.

"And, under the circumstances, darling," Anne added innocently, "I think Mr. Anders and Mr. Mains and Mr. Greene would all be very happy to go on your note! Especially since they would like you to be discreet about what you told!"

Ted gazed at her with a vast admiration. "Ain't you the one!" he said.

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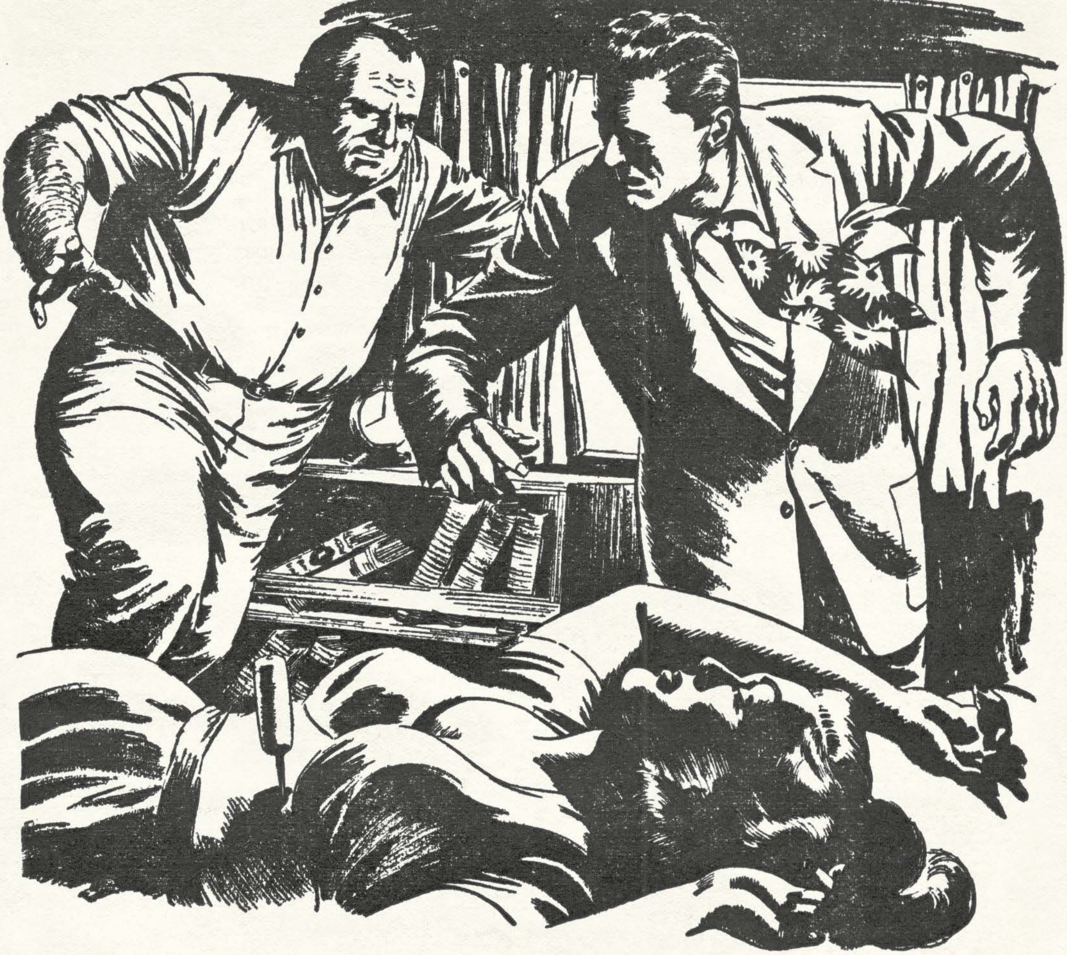


Fuller launched himself at Tom Esterson, crying "Murder! Help! Murder!"

THE KILLER TAKES HIS PICK

By CURTISS T. GARDNER

Slaughter plays an encore in a Florida trailer camp when Tom Esterson matches wits with a million-dollar heiress!

ANY ONE of a million people digging out from snowfalls in the North would have seen only beauty if they had been with Tom Esterson on that bright January afternoon when he drove his battered roadster into Bayview Trailer Park at Sarasota. They would have seen cocoanut palms lacy against the blue-green water, gray moss hanging in festoons like Christmas tinsel from great live oaks, and scarlet hibiscus blossoms as large as a man's fist.

As Tom let his car roll slowly along the dirt road beside the bay's edge, he noticed none of these things. Oddly enough, he was recalling a darkness that crawled with unseen terror. Remembering mud and bitter cold and utter misery. The rumble of big guns beating a devil's tattoo in the distance, and their flashes penciling red lines against a black horizon. And the stink of death permeating everything.

That had been a long time ago, in a foxhole just outside Bastogne. He and Phil Cartwright had spent a night waiting for the expected German attack. Phil, under a fatalistic conviction that he would die in action, had overcome his customary reticence.

"When I first learned that the molybdenum deposits under my worthless desert land would make me a millionaire," Phil had told Tom Esterson, "I had my will drawn. The Cartwrights never wasted any affection on me. I know they adopted me only for cheap help around their farm. But a fellow doesn't want his dough to go to absolute strangers. So I made them my heirs."

He went on then to tell Tom how he had discovered that he had a sister by the name of Mary Ellen. He had been too tiny in his orphanage days to remember her. But with his new-found wealth, Phil had hired an agency to look for her. Records at the institution showed that she had been adopted by a couple named Birdsley. They were theatrical people.

MARY ELLEN had played small-time vaudeville circuits with them for several years afterward, until a fresh misfortune in the form of a train wreck robbed her of both foster parents. After that, she dropped completely out of sight.

"I changed my will," Phil had told Tom Esterson. "So Mary Ellen will get my entire estate. But there had to be some time limit. I specified that she must be found within a year after my own death. I wish now I'd made it longer. You see, this mudhole that we're roosting in tonight didn't figure in my plans. I'd feel a whole lot better, Tom, if I knew you'd make a personal effort to find my sister, if anything happens to me."

Tom promised.

Phil Cartwright did not die in action. Phil went home, nearly a year before Tom himself returned. So the matter of Mary Ellen almost vanished from Tom's mind, until one bleak day in New York City, late in October, he learned that Phil had been murdered.

Now Tom looked out over the bay where the huge yellow Florida sun hung poised for its nightly dive into the Gulf. At midnight it would be one year since Phil had died. And in spite of Tom's long painstaking search, Mary Ellen was still unfound.

Continuing to drive slowly along the dirt road in the auto-park, Tom anxiously surveyed each trailer in the long double rows. Without much remaining hope of success. Finding one lone, wheeled home in this season-crowded tourist land was like hunting an individual mullet among the swarms in the vastness of the Gulf.

Yet Tom was convinced that he was really on the right trail of a good clue—a green-and-silver house trailer. If only he had a little more time!

But he hadn't.

Continued frustration for months had ridged Tom's wide, intelligent forehead with worry grooves. They smoothed now as he caught sight of a trailer parked under one of the moss-hung live oaks. A big trailer, almost as big as a Pullman car. It was new looking in its two-tone paint job, light green and dark green. It had an aluminum silver top.

Tom pulled his car quickly off the road. He caught up a bag containing small, colored bottles. The bottles were his excuse for visiting these trailer parks. And for lingering to talk with the trailerites.

The big trailer was like the one whose description had taken him through most of the camps along both Florida coasts—an Alma-made *Liberator*. Approaching it, he saw the owner seated outside the trailer in a folding chair. The man was busy putting a coat of shellac on a casting rod. A big, solidly built man with a round, meaty face and jet-black hair thinning markedly on the top.

Not long ago a man with an Alma *Liberator* in a New Jersey park, whose description had started Tom on his rounds of the tourist spots, had had gray hair. But Tom knew a few drops of hair dye on a comb could work a remarkable transformation.

The trailer door opened. A woman stepped out. She wore a white halter-bra playsuit. Her bare midriff was slim, browned by the tropic sun. She was no girl. Inexpert in his judgment of feminine ages, Tom thought she must be in her middle forties.

She spoke to the man in a worried tone. "Mary seems worse, George."

The man grunted.

Tom clicked open his bag and took out a squat blue bottle with a piece of wick thrust into the neck.

"Good afternoon, folks. I have here a little device guaranteed to make life in any trailer more comfortable."

The man glanced up briefly. "We don't want to buy anything."

Tom smiled pleasantly.

"How can you tell so quickly?" He turned his attention to the woman. "When I show you how all your cooking and other unpleasant odors can be entirely eliminated, and how the atmosphere of your trailer can be rendered perpetually sweet and fragrant, I'm sure you won't want to be without this." He laid his hand on the closed screen door of the trailer. "I'll be glad to demonstrate for you, without the slightest obligation."

"You can't go in there," the woman called hurriedly. "Our daughter is in bed, sick."

"Now that's a shame. Nothing serious, I hope?"

Tom did not wait for an answer, but he went ahead in his sales patter with simulated enthusiasm. Mention of the girl had again stirred the dying flame of his hope.

"The pleasant scent my little bottle creates will positively make any sick person feel better," Tom said. "I'll just step inside a moment and show you."

THE MAN set down his fishing rod and got to his feet. "You heard what Mrs. Fuller said. You can't go in. We're not interested."

Fuller? The name of the New Jersey trailerites had been different. But names, like gray hairs, can easily enough be changed, if people want to keep their identity a secret.

"You're making a serious mistake, Mr. Fuller," Tom persisted. "Your daughter would be more comfortable."

"I'll be the judge of that," Fuller snapped.

"Your license tags show you're from Jersey," Tom said in a disarmingly friendly manner. "I was wondering if you lived near New York City? I come from the Bronx, myself. I used to know a girl near Englewood, named Mary Fuller. Is your daughter about twenty-three, a small girl, a blonde with unusually large blue eyes?"

A puzzled expression spread across Fuller's round face.

"Why yes, she is. But I don't recall—"

"I've studied medicine," Tom bluffed quickly. "If I could take a look at Mary, I might be able to suggest—"

The woman interrupted quickly. "We don't know you, young man. And we already have a doctor for Mary."

The muscles of Tom's lean, boyish face tautened. He decided to take a chance.

"If your daughter has a birthmark at the back of her neck," he said simply, "a series of little black moles in the shape of a heart, then I can show her how to get two million dollars. Is there anything wrong with Mary that two million wouldn't cure?"

He was watching their faces narrowly for the reaction. George Fuller seemed bewildered.

"Two million? What are you talking about, Mister?"

Tom did not miss the cold light which glowed suddenly deep in the woman's muddy-brown eyes.

"Just trying to convince you that I ought to prescribe for Miss Mary Fuller," Tom said easily.

"You've certainly convinced me!" Mrs. Fuller said. "You're crazy! Our daughter has no birthmark. I think you'd better leave now."

Fuller took his cue from the woman. He stepped forward again, flexing his big biceps threateningly.

"Yes, get going! Beat it!"

Tom shrugged and walked away. His suspicions were now thoroughly aroused. More than ever, he determined to see the girl inside the green-and-silver trailer. And before midnight. But how?

He now regretted keenly that he had mentioned the money and the birthmark. He had accomplished nothing. Perhaps he had alarmed these people. He could feel their eyes on his back as he walked across to the neighboring trailer.

This was an Alma *Liberator*, also. A big twenty-seven footer, like the Fuller's, with a similar silver top. But the body was blue and gray. Empty army cartridge boxes blocked up the four corners, and the gear stowed underneath gave it more of an air of permanence in the camp than the one Tom had just left.

No one was around outside. Tom rapped

on the closed door. It opened. A woman about Mrs. Fuller's age peered out questioningly. Tom went immediately into his salesman's act. This woman seemed more receptive. She held the door wide.

"Come on in."

Tom did. The interior of the trailer was disorderly. A sofa-bed, in what was the living room, was unmade. Dirty dishes littered the sink in the middle section, which was the kitchen.

A little old white-haired lady was reading a newspaper in the fading daylight. She picked up a pair of glasses from the drop-leaf table by her side to peer at Tom curiously through thick lenses.

The younger woman combined introduction with explanation.

"Aunt Melba, this gentleman has something that gets rid of kitchen odors."

"Much more than that," Tom added quickly. "It cleanses and purifies the whole atmosphere in your home. Let me show you."

He set the blue bottle on a shelf above the unmade sofa-bed, touched a match to the wick. A thin spiral of scented smoke commenced to curl upward immediately.

"Please excuse the looks of this place." Aunt Melba was apologetic. "It should have been tidied up hours ago but Mr. Knott has been sleeping all day."

AS SHE spoke, she pushed the long leaf of the table up into the wall. It latched there, as a built-in ironing board. She gathered the bedding and mattress from the sofa-bed, lifting them into one of the trailer's innumerable storage spaces. Then, stooping, she pulled one side of the bed itself upward. There was a metallic click as a locking device engaged. In another moment, the bed had been transformed into a neat sofa.

"Marvelous how conveniently things fold away in these modern trailers, isn't it?" Tom said.

Aunt Melba showed enthusiasm.

"Just imagine what trailer life will be like fifty years from now. With atomic power we won't even need a tow car. Just stick a little capsule somewhere and *bing*—we'll go where we please! It'll be wonderful."

"With your lame back, Aunt Melba," said the younger woman, "you aren't likely to enjoy living in any trailer fifty years from now."

The remark struck Tom as pointed and not at all kind. The old lady's sweet face, under her snowy hair, remained serene and placid, but a wistful note crept into her voice.

"I suppose you're right, Wilma. But the world should be a great place then, and I'd like to see it."

Tom felt almost embarrassed at the turn of the conversation. He switched it back hurriedly to his demonstration.

"Notice the pleasant odor in here already?"

Unexpectedly, a man's legs swung into view from a built-in bunk at the other end of the trailer. The man himself soon emerged, rubbing his eyes with big fists, yawning sleepily.

He was a chunky man like Fuller next door, but somehow he gave an impression of greater strength, in spite of the gray hair which made him look older than his unpleasant neighbor. This, Tom decided, must be Mr. Knott.

"Where'd you get the incense, Wilma?" Knott demanded.

"It's not incense. This young man is showing us a new invention."

Tom grinned inwardly. Actually, his invention consisted of nothing more than a short pyramid of ordinary dime-store incense wrapped in a short, thin piece of wick. Just enough wick to conceal the incense until it was hidden by the blue bottle-glass.

"The combination of aromatic gums and spices from which I compound my magic bottle has much the same smell as incense," Tom said. "While there are other and more widely advertised odor absorbents on the market, none are as cheap and effective as mine."

He went on until Knott said finally, "Smells just like incense to me, Bud, but I'll buy two or three of your bottles."

After making the sale, Tom lingered for the real purpose of his call.

"Your neighbors," he said, jerking his thumb in the direction of the Fuller trailer, "aren't very friendly."

"They have a sick daughter," Wilma Knott said.

"So I heard. I used to know a girl named Mary Fuller. I'm wondering if she's the same one. What does she look like, Mrs. Knott?"

"I wouldn't know. We haven't been here very long, ourselves. But no one around this camp has ever seen Mary Fuller. She hasn't been outside that trailer since they arrived."

When he emerged from Gus Knott's trailer after a little more profitless conversation, Tom felt a sinking of his spirits. He had so little on which to go. His only lead from the beginning had been a girl's photograph in the files of the New York police.

The picture had been that of a woman suspected of killing Phil Cartwright. She was Mary La Farge, but the name was admittedly assumed for professional purposes. She had come from the chorus in one of the city's lesser night-spots to a job as a photographer's model.

She had shared a room in a cheap apartment house with another model. This roommate had been at home alone on the evening that Phil Cartwright called. But she was dressing to go out on a date and paid scant attention to Phil. All she could say afterward was that Phil told her he had something of vital importance to tell Mary and that he would wait there until Mary came in.

The roommate had gone out on her date. When she returned, Phil was still there. Dead! Undressed and in Mary's bed, his skull cracked by a blow from Mary's spike-heeled slipper.

Mary La Farge never came back to her apartment. To the police, this proved her guilt. They broadcast her description, particularly an identifying birthmark. But Mary La Farge was never found. And because none of the people involved were important, the file had been allowed to become inactive.

PURE chance had caused Tom to set his notebook down on top of Mary La Farge's photograph, so that the girl's thick blond hair was covered. It came to him then, with a shock, that the pictured features held an amazing resemblance to Phil Cartwright's. That, plus a birthmark, started the train of thought which carried Tom five thousand miles on a will-o'-the-wisp search.

First, he'd gone to the agency commissioned by Phil to find Mary Ellen "Birdsley." He'd told them his idea that Mary "La Farge" and Mary Ellen Birdsley were one and the same. He believed that Phil had found his sister the night of his death. Because a two-million-dollar heiress is well worth finding, the agency had given Tom the job and an expense account.

Tom went to the Cartwright farm near the Nebraska-Colorado border. He found that the Cartwrights had sold their place shortly before Phil's return from overseas. They had bought a large trailer, had announced their intention of first visiting New York City and then of traveling for a few years.

Inquiry also established the strange fact that the Mary La Farge girl had middle-aged friends who lived in a trailer camp outside the big city.

Now, standing beside his aged car in Sarasota's Bayview Trailer Park, Tom stared across the water toward the colorful afterglow left by the departing sun. But he was not admiring sunset beauty. To him, it meant that less than six hours remained before Mary Ellen would be excluded from the bequest that Phil Cartwright had wished his sister to enjoy.

Tom Esterson did not believe that Mary Ellen had committed murder.

If the girl in the green-and-silver trailer were actually Mary Ellen, her birthmark would provide positive identification. But if Mary Ellen were afraid of a murder charge, she would naturally keep herself hidden.

Tom drove off in his car to the camp restaurant, but excitement robbed him of appetite. After a light meal, he sat in his car again, wrapped in his doubts and fears, while the twilight settled rapidly into dusk. When finally it was quite dark, he drove back to Fuller's trailer.

No lights showed inside the closed, awning-covered windows. That was good. Maybe the man and woman had gone to town, leaving the daughter alone.

Tom opened the trailer door without knocking. The screen door squealed a little as he pulled it open. No sound came from inside. Tom had his flashlight in his hand as he stepped into the trailer.

The beam cut through the compact living room and the tidy kitchen. The interior of this trailer was exactly like the one owned by Gus Knott. Tom stepped quickly to the built-in bed at the far end of the small home.

As he shined the light downward, Tom had a swift impression of a chalky face and of eyes wide and dark, staring blankly toward the ceiling.

He saw then that the woman on the bed was not the girl he had hoped to find. She was George Fuller's wife, Agnes, still dressed in the white playsuit, which was white no longer.

A dark stain over her heart was spreading slowly.

In the center of that stain stood the wooden handle of an ice pick.

Shock and surprise held Tom motionless as the trailer quivered beneath someone's weight.

Lights sprang on. Tom twisted to see the round, questioning face of George Fuller behind him. The man's eyes swerved to the bunk and its ghastly burden.

"Murder!" Fuller shouted then. "Help! Murder!"

The man launched himself at Tom, his arms spread wide, as if to gather Tom in a bear hug. There was little room in the narrow trailer in which Tom could sidestep. He lashed out, felt his fist connect with the big man's flabby jowl. Fuller, though he sagged, clung heavily to his foe, trying to wind a leg around Tom. All the time, the man continued to shout loudly for help.

Tom jerked backward, trying to free himself. He stumbled over a hassock and fell. Fuller's hold on him was broken. Struggling to his feet, Tom plunged for the door, with Fuller's clutching fingers closing on his shirt.

The shirt tore. Tom kicked the screen door open and leaped outside as Fuller lurched into the lighted opening. The camp was thoroughly aroused. Men were running toward the big trailer as Tom ducked behind a hibiscus bush to lose himself in darkness.

He heard excited voices at the door of the green-and-silver trailer, and George Fuller's deep bass was calling—

"My wife's been stabbed! I caught the man who did it! But he got away. He's outside somewhere."

TOM HEADED for his car on the run. Before he reached it, common sense overruled his initial thought of making a dash for town. He knew he'd never get as far as the camp entrance. Not with scores of trailers crowded along the dirt camp road all the way back to the paved highway.

A live oak near the spot where his roadster was parked provided a solution for Tom. Worming up the sloping trunk, he reached a crotch. There, one stout limb was thickly twined with gray moss.

With the moss draped around him, Tom watched lights bobbing all over the trailer park and men rushing to and fro. The whole wheeled village buzzed like a stricken hive.

In fifteen or twenty minutes, Tom heard the sound of approaching sirens. This was the police from Sarasota. Squad cars pulled up not far from his precarious perch. Tom's pulse pounded painfully in his throat when men passed directly below his perch. Luckily for him, no one thought to throw a light beam upward.

He could hear them talking below. Fuller told about Tom's attempt to sell an odor-absorbent gadget, and about how Fuller had gone into the trailer and had found Tom leaning over the body of Fuller's murdered wife.

They located Tom's car quickly enough. Tom watched helplessly as it was towed away. Things didn't begin to quiet down for more than an hour. The passage of time, as much as anything else, made him sweat hot and then cold as he clung to the tree, waiting.

Precious minutes slipped past. Soon it was after eight o'clock. Less than four hours remained in which to carry out his job and the last wishes of his buddy. Yet he dared not leave his hiding place. To be taken by the police on a charge of murder would be no help to anyone.

In another half hour, he could stand the suspense no longer. If he were to do nothing more than protect his own neck, it was time he got moving. Tom did not try to kid himself. More than one innocent man, he knew, had gone to the electric chair with no more circumstantial evidence against him.

But Tom did not intend to run away. In his frantic attempt to figure some way out, he had decided that the time for all circumspection was gone. He was convinced that the alleged sick girl in George Fuller's trailer was Mary Ellen Birdsley—that is, Mary La Farge.

The fever of the trailer camp had cooled. His hazard, Tom knew, would be far less if he waited until most of the camp people went to bed.

Although the squad cars had gone back to town, a few officers had been left on watch. But Tom couldn't afford further waiting.

He had to take a chance now. No other way remained.

Moving silently across the grass, he took care to avoid the frequent splotches of light spilled from trailer windows in the long row. A dog barked on the other side of the camp.

The hoarse squawking sound from the direction of the shore line was a heron wading in the water.

At the side of Gus Knott's trailer, Tom took shelter behind a huge jasmine vine growing over a wooden trellis. The faint smell of cooking floated out to him, mingled with the sweet scent of the jasmine. Through the partly closed window of the big trailer, he caught a glimpse of Aunt Melba fussing with something on the kitchen hot plate.

He saw the anxious expression on the old lady's sweet, placid face.

"Yes, I quite agree," Tom heard her say. "Entirely too close for comfort."

Knott's voice said something that Tom didn't catch, then Mrs. Knott spoke anxiously.

"But will we be able to leave, after what's happened?"

Tom ducked around the trellis. Under the trailer he found a short, splintery piece of two-by-four. He hefted it as a club as he moved along to the side of George Fuller's green trailer.

A heavy crashing sound came from the darkness on his left. He stopped breathing for an instant, then relaxed with a sigh of relief when he realized a frond had fallen from a cocoanut palm.

That's when a man came around the side of Fuller's trailer and almost walked into Tom.

Fuller's windows were dark again, but enough light filtered across from Knott's trailer so that Tom could see the khaki uniform and the black holster on the man's side. He was one of the local police.

Tom had no desire to hurt a man who was simply doing his job. But self-preservation is the first law of nature. And Tom knew that more than his own safety was involved.

HE ACTED instinctively, lashing out the edge of his open palm in a judo blow learned during the course of his army training. It was a blow that might have killed, but Tom pulled his force deliberately. A startled exclamation died in the man's throat as he toppled.

Quickly, Tom sprang to Fuller's door. He knew just where a lamp was located at the end of the trailer living room. His groping fingers found the cord, yanked it down.

George Fuller sprang up instantly from the sofa where he had been stretched. His small eyes, blinking in the sudden glare, widened at sight of the club in Tom's hand. An expression of abject terror contorted Fuller's flaccid face.

Tom spoke in a low urgent tone.

"Don't make any noise. And don't stall this time. I want to see this so-called daughter of yours. And I want to see her now."

Fuller was stammering, but he kept his voice down, as instructed.

"She is very sick. We had to take her to the hospital."

"That's not true!" Tom swung the two-by-four in a short, threatening arc. "I'm warning you for the last time. I want to see that girl."

Fuller huddled back against the trailer wall, his hands in the air, as if he were covered by a gun. He inched back slowly toward the rear of the trailer, as if contemplating a dash to safety.

Tom took a step forward.

"You haven't any daughter," he accused. "The girl who lived here was—"

Suddenly Fuller's hand struck the folded table. Released from its catch, the flat board swept down, striking Tom squarely across the head.

It was not a stunning blow, but its complete unexpectedness dazed him. Tom staggered. Fuller struck the rough club from his hand to the trailer floor.

"You maniac!" Fuller cried. "You crazy killer! You murdered my wife and now—" He snatched up the club before Tom could recover. "I ought to beat your skull in!"

Tom retreated before the savage threat in the man's eyes. He backed through the kitchen section and into the rear space containing the built-in bunk. Momentarily, he expected Fuller to make good his threat. But the man did not strike.

Sliding doors made it possible for the rear section of the trailer to be converted into a closed room. Fuller pulled them out from their grooves in the wall with one hand, while he brandished the club with the other.

"Stay in there," Fuller growled, "until I get the law and have you put where you belong."

It was not so much the ache in Tom's head that dulled his senses, although his bruised scalp throbbed dully. He was overpowered by a feeling of abject and ignominious failure. With the clock steadily ticking away the last remaining minutes of his time to help Mary Ellen, he had succeeded only in getting himself trapped like a rat in a wire cage.

He tore at the sliding doors fiercely. They were immovable. A faint rattling sound told him Fuller must have fastened them on the other side with a hook.

Tom turned to the window just above the bunk. One glance told him it was far too small for his wide shoulders to negotiate. He sat down on the bunk, overcome with a feeling of complete helplessness.

At any instant he expected to hear Fuller yelling for help. But he heard nothing except a mewing noise somewhere outside the trailer, such as made by a cat in trouble. That might be the felled policeman regaining consciousness and ready soon to go into action.

Abruptly, like a disconnected electric motor supplied with current again, Tom's brain began to function once more. A way of escape still remained. He might cut his way out through the trailer walls. Most trailers are built of leatherette or masonite.

Furiously he attacked the plyboard with his pocket knife. The blade ripped easily enough through the thin wood, into insulating material and thin, wooden backing behind it. Then it grated on metal.

This trailer had a steel body.

JERKING the knife away, Tom leaped onto the bunk. He tried the roof. It was nothing but canvas, covered with waterproof silver-aluminum paint.

Why Fuller had not aroused the whole camp by this time puzzled Tom. Desperation gave him savage energy as he attacked the thin roof boards above the bed. This time, when he cut through the outer layers, he could feel resistance to the knife blade suddenly lessen. It was through the top!

Five minutes of frenzied hacking, and the trailer roof was ruined. It sagged and crumpled under Tom's weight as he pulled himself up from the bunk, through the gaping hole, and into the night.

He dropped over the side of the trailer to the ground—almost on top of an inert figure. At first he thought it was the cop whom he had knocked out before the ill-fated attempt to scare Fuller.

It wasn't the cop. The policeman still lay where he had fallen near the front end of the long trailer. This other man was George Fuller.

Tom fumbled for a book of matches in his pocket. The first brief spurt of flame revealed blood on the big man's clothing. A trail of drops led back to the trailer steps.

This was why Fuller had made no outcry. Another murder. Was someone trying to wipe out the whole Fuller family?

Then Tom saw that the man was not dead. Fuller's head moved and his eyelids fluttered in the light of Tom's second match. Tom dropped to his knees beside the wounded man.

"Who stabbed you, Fuller?"

The man made the same mewing noise that Tom had heard while inside the trailer.

Tom took him by the shoulders and shook him gently.

"You've got to talk, Fuller! Someone killed your wife and then tried to get you. Why?"

The man's lips moved. He made incoherent noises. Tom leaned close. An automobile engine started somewhere near by. The sound almost drowned out the faint words Fuller uttered.

"Old woman—next trailer—"

"You don't mean the old lady stabbed you?" Tom asked.

Fuller's voice sounded a little stronger.

"No—not—old lady—Agnes in the showers—"

The man ceased abruptly. He was unconscious again.

Tom leaped up. A number of tiny details, each so small that it amounted to nothing alone, suddenly grouped themselves together, as if by the catalysis of the wounded man's speech. Together they made something big and ugly.

This man was in a desperate, perhaps in a dying, condition. Tom knew that delay in bringing assistance might be fatal. Yet to summon help could be equally fatal to himself. He did not hesitate, because the life of Mary Ellen was also in deadly peril.

At the top of his lungs he shouted—

"Help! Police!"

Then he sprinted for Gus Knott's trailer next door.

The trailer door was shut. Tom did not knock, but jerked it open unceremoniously. The screen door beyond it was latched. He put his shoulder against it. Screws made a tearing sound as they ripped loose and then wood splintered.

Behind Tom, the camp was beginning to buzz. Police whistles shrilled. The darkness was filled with running figures. Flashlight beams converged on the Fuller trailer.

Tom found Wilma Knott sewing under a floor lamp. She got halfway to her feet with a startled cry as Tom burst in. Gus Knott was in the kitchen. His slate-gray eyes were apprehensive as he whirled around.

Tom brushed past the man, tore open the sliding door to the rear bedroom compartment. He pulled the light cord.

AUNT MELBA was in bed. Her eyes blinked up at him in the sudden glare. Tom noticed for the first time how large those eyes were without the distortion of her thick glasses. And how blue.

"What," she asked, "what do you—"

Tom stooped and drew back the loose coil of hair from the nape of her neck. A heart-shaped cluster of tiny black moles was revealed. Tom's hand was white with powder as he let the hair fall again.

"For a girl with stage experience," he said a trifle bitterly, "you didn't play a very convincing part, Mary Ellen. I should have suspected it when I first saw you this afternoon. Anyone who can read newspaper print without glasses, doesn't need them to see an unexpected visitor. And a person with a lame back doesn't usually lift mattresses and folding beds."

Color drained from the girl's face as Tom spoke, making it even more apparent that the lines of age in her smooth, young face had been put there by skillful application of make-up.

"It's a marvel you didn't get yourself killed, too," Tom said rapidly. "If it hadn't seemed simpler for your friends to keep you under wraps, they would have murdered you."

Gus Knott had his icebox door open in search of a weapon. He charged from the galley with an ice pick in his raised right hand. Tom sidestepped the man's rush. But in the narrow space of the trailer, Tom didn't have quite enough room to escape the downsweep of the weapon completely. The point caught the cloth of his shirt sleeve, tearing it, inflicting a deep gash in the flesh of his upper arm.

Tom drove his fist into the attacker's half-open mouth. Knott staggered back, the ice pick clattering to the linoleum floor, where drops of blood from Knott's smashed lips mingled with that spattered from Tom's wound.

"You see what I mean," Tom remarked dryly to the girl.

Excited voices were now close outside. Heavy feet pounded into the trailer. A cop came in with a drawn gun. Behind the officer was the park manager, face lined and weary.

Knott brushed the back of his hand across his swelling lips.

"Here's the murderer you're after, men." He pointed to the ice pick on the floor. "Just tried to knock me off, too."

The policeman leveled his gun at Tom.

"All right, Mister. Better come along without a fuss."

The girl who had posed as Aunt Melba was sitting up in bed now, the covers drawn protectively around her. She looked bewildered.

"Tell them about Knott, Mary Ellen," Tom said. "You don't need to be afraid. They framed you for Phil Cartwright's murder. They did it, themselves."

"This man is a lunatic," Knott shouted. "I was in here with my family when he broke the door down and tried to kill me with the same weapon he used on poor Fuller."

The cop caught at Tom's sleeve.

Tom jerked away, and more blood drops fell on the floor.

"This is the weapon used on Fuller, right enough," Tom said. "But how come Knott knew it, if you were in here with the door locked?" Tom turned again to Mary

Ellen. "These people you know as the Knotts are really the Cartwrights, foster parents of your brother Phil, and his murderers. They might have killed you, too, Mary Ellen. They made friends with you purposely, planning to get Phil's money.

"There's a fire escape outside the living room of the apartment you used to occupy in New York. As I picture it, this Cartwright man came up that way, hiding in the darkness outside while he watched your roommate talk with Phil. Then Cartwright—Knott—stepped through the window and struck Phil a deadly blow over the head with your slipper heel. He undressed Phil, put him in your bed, and went out the way he came. He must have walked in on you later and persuaded you—"

The girl broke in, a note of amazement in her voice.

"Why he and Wilma did come to my door that night, before I'd even discovered the man's body. Of course, I'd never seen the dead man before. I had no idea it was my own brother. The Knotts—or Cartwrights—told me I'd have a hard time to prove my innocence. They persuaded me to go along with them in the trailer and conceal my identity until such time as the case would be forgotten."

The policeman interrupted the girl.

"How about the woman that was killed next door tonight?"

"It wouldn't have happened," Tom said, "if Agnes Fuller had not been greedy and dishonest. When I made a remark about two million dollars, and an identifying birthmark, she most likely remembered that she'd seen a woman in the showers recently, under circumstances, I don't doubt, where the birthmark was not entirely concealed. It was evident that Aunt Melba wasn't as old as she looked. Agnes Fuller must have come over here to blackmail Knott—I mean Cartwright."

"She came to see *me*," Mary Ellen said. "She didn't know what was going on, but she demanded money to keep her silent about my age. Mr. Knott—Cartwright—happened to come in and overhear. He said he'd see the woman and arrange to keep her quiet until morning, when we'd pull out and head West."

"Lies!" Cartwright shouted. "Absolutely unfounded in fact."

TOM stabbed an accusing finger again at the man. "Fortunately for Fuller, he wasn't around when you called at his trailer. He must have been taking his sick daughter to the hospital. Anyhow, you found Agnes Fuller home, and you stabbed her.

"When I came along, you couldn't get your chance at Fuller. Of course, Fuller didn't actually know what was going on. Otherwise, he wouldn't have thought I was responsible for stabbing his wife. But you weren't taking any chances. You watched and waited, and when you saw me knock out the cop on guard, you rushed over to stab Fuller. You expected I'd be framed for both murders."

"You're not framed," Cartwright said easily. "You're guilty. You can't prove a word of what you've said."

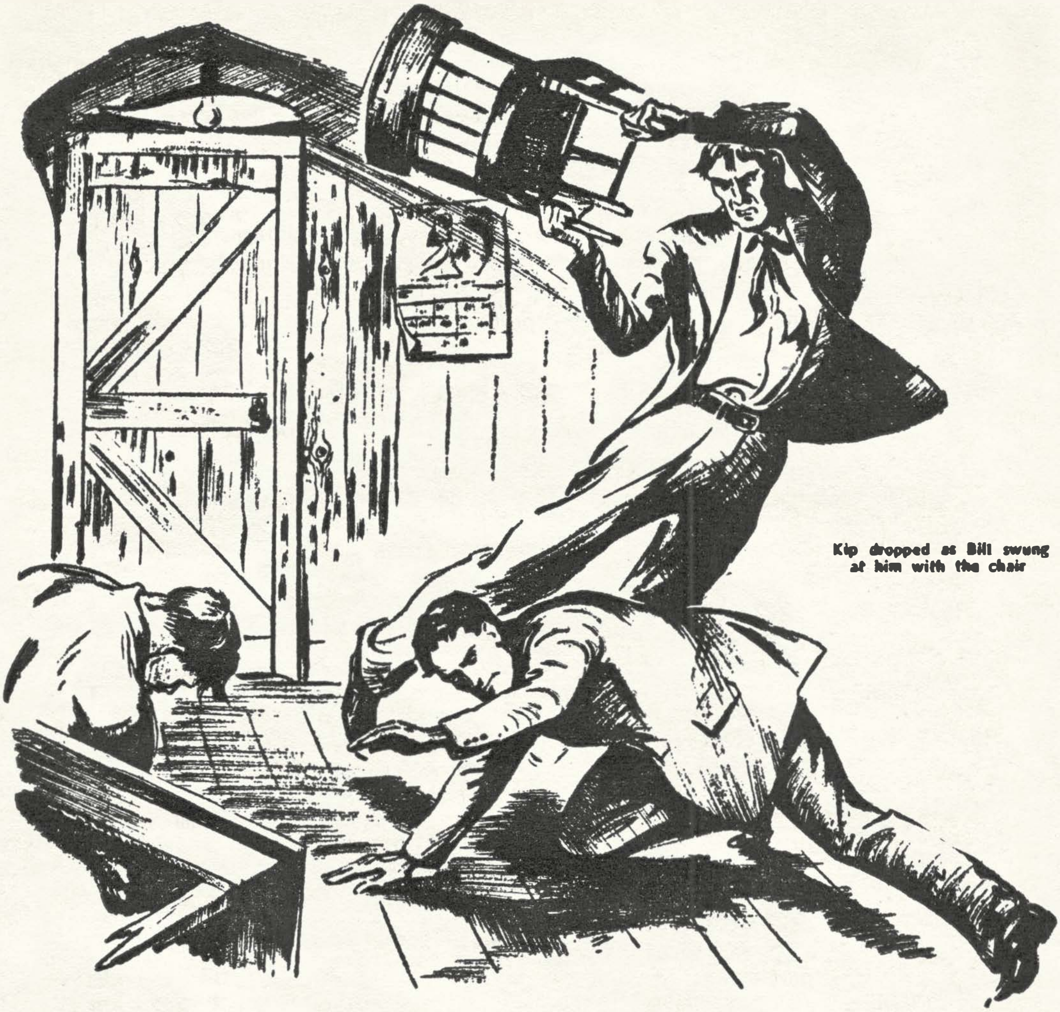
"Wrong again. Fuller isn't dead. He told me you were the one who struck him down. I thought at the time he was saying, 'not the old lady.' What he actually said was 'Knott.' "

Tom heaved a deep sigh. "I don't mind admitting I was scared stiff. I knew you had your pick." He grinned sourly at his own pun. "Your pick of victims. Another murder would be a drop in the bucket after what you'd already done. I was desperately afraid you'd decide to eliminate Mary Ellen."

"I think we'll all go down to headquarters," said the policeman, "and let the chief in on this."

"Suits me fine, officer." Tom shoved his watch in front of the policeman's eyes. "Just remember it is now ten o'clock. That gives me two hours leeway before the time set in Phil Cartwright's will expires." He turned to Mary Ellen. "When we come back, I think I'd better bring one of my little blue bottles. The smell of murder in here is too strong for comfort."

Next Issue: Exciting Crime and Mystery Thrillers by William Campbell Gault, C. S. Montanye, Wyatt Blassingame, Carl G. Hodges and Others!



Kip dropped as Bill swung at him with the chair

DEAD MAN'S TRAIL

By LOUIS L'AMOUR

Kip Morgan's first job as a private detective is to prove Mrs. Roger Whitson's husband is not a murderer!

KIP MORGAN sat unhappily over a Bourbon and soda in a bar on Sixth Street. How in blazes did you find a man, who did not want to be found, when all you knew about him was that he was thirty-six years old and played a saxophone? Especially, when some badly charred remains, tagged with this man's name, had been buried in New Jersey? All you had to go on was a woman's hunch.

Not quite all. The lady with the hunch was willing to back her belief with ten dollars a day for expenses and five thousand if the missing man was found.

Kipling Morgan was a private detective and this was his first case. Five thousand was a lot of money. It would buy a lot of ham and eggs. At the moment, ten dollars a day was important money.

"You shouldn't be overly sentimental," he told himself. "This babe has the dough, and she wants you to look. All right, you're looking, so what are you fussing about?"

He was conscientious. That was his trouble. He didn't want to spend the woman's money without giving something in return. Moreover, he was ambitious. He wanted to succeed with his first case. Particularly, such a case as this. He could use some headlines.

Kip Morgan ordered another drink and thought about it. He lit a cigarette, and thought some more. He took the battered black hat off his head and ran his fingers through his dark hair. He stared at his glass and swore. He looked at the end of his cigarette, and muttered under his breath.

Five days ago the door of his cubbyhole of an office opened and in walked a mink coat with a blonde in the middle. She was in her late twenties, had a model's walk and one of those figures that are made to wear clothes, but look pretty good without them.

"You are Kip Morgan?" she inquired.

HE PULLED his feet off the desk and unfurled his lean, hard muscled six feet one and nodded. "Yes. What can I do for you?" he said.

"Do you have any cases you are working on right now?" Her eyes were gray, direct, sincere. They were also beautiful.

"Well, ah—" he hesitated and his face got red. He could feel it getting red and it made him sore. What could he tell her? That she was the first client who ever walked into his office? It would scarcely inspire confidence.

"As a matter of fact," she said, the ghost of a smile hovering about her lips, "I am quite aware you have no other cases. I made inquiries and was told you were the youngest, newest, and least occupied private detective in town."

He grinned in spite of himself. "Gosh!" he said, "that's not very good advertising, is it?"

"It is to me. I want an investigator with ambition. I want a fresh viewpoint. I want someone who can devote all his time to the job."

"That's my number you're calling," he said. "It looks like we could do business. Won't you sit down?"

She sat down and showed a lot of expensive hosiery and some beautifully shaped legs. "My name is Mrs. Roger Whitson. I'm a widow with one child—a boy.

"Four years ago, in New Jersey, my husband, who was a payroll messenger, started from the bank acting as guard for a teller named Henry Willard and a fifty thousand dollar payroll.

"They were headed for the plant of the Adco Products. They never reached it. Several days later some hunters found the badly charred body of a man lying beside an overturned and burned car in a gully some distance off a lonely road. The body was identified as that of Henry Willard.

"The police decided my husband had murdered him and stolen the fifty thousand dollars. They never found him or any clue to his whereabouts."

Kip Morgan shrugged. "What do you want me for?" he asked. "It sounds like a police matter. If they can't find him with all their angles, I don't see how I could."

"They can't find him because they are looking for the wrong man," Helen Whitson declared. "Mr. Morgan, you may not have much faith in a woman's intuition or whatever you call it. I haven't much myself. One thing I know. The charred body they found was my husband!"

"But," Kip protested, "they can identify a man by his fingerprints, by his teeth, by so many methods."

"I know all that," she agreed. "But it so happened that all the dead man's finger tips were burned, badly. They said he had burned them trying to force the car door open. It looked to me like somebody had deliberately burned those finger tips!"

His eyes glinted. "You mean, to prevent fingerprinting?"

"Exactly. They found a capped tooth in the dead man's mouth. Henry Willard had a capped tooth. But so did my husband. No dental records were available on either man, and the police disregarded my statement.

"They found fragments of clothing, a key ring, pocket knife and such things that were positively identified as belonging to Henry Willard. The police were convinced. They wouldn't listen to me because they thought I was covering up for my husband.

"Mr. Morgan, I have a son growing up. He's going to begin asking about his father. I'm not going to have him believing his father a criminal when I know he is not!

"My husband was murdered by Henry Willard. The reason they have not found my husband is because his body lies in that grave. I know that Henry Willard is alive today, and he is safe because they have never even looked for him."

"But," he was puzzled, "you apparently have money. Why should your husband steal, or why should they believe he stole, if he had money?"

"When my husband was alive we had nothing," she told him frankly. "We lived on his salary, and I kept house like any young wife. After he was killed I went to New York and worked. I was doing well, and then my uncle died and left me a wealthy woman. I am prepared to retain you for a year, if it takes that long, or longer. I want to find that man!"

THE information she could give him was very little. Henry Willard would be thirty-six years old now. He played the saxophone with almost professional skill. He neither gambled nor drank. He seemed to have little association with women. He had been two inches over six feet and had weighed one hundred and seventy.

He had several times, in her presence, expressed an interest in California. That had been over a year before the crime.

For hours they sat in his office and Kip questioned her. He got her talking about her life with her husband, about the parties they had, the picnics. Several times Henry Willard had been along. Many times she had seen him at the bank. He had, for over a year, at the request of the company, carried the payroll of Adco Products.

He had never played golf or tennis. He expressed a dislike for horses, and Helen recalled, during that long session, that he disliked dogs, also.

"He must have been a crook," Kip grinned, "if he didn't like dogs."

"I know he was!" Helen stated positively. She described his food, the way he walked, his reading—her eyes flashed. "There's something! He read *Variety*. I've seen him with it several times."

Kip Morgan noted it, and went on. The man had black hair. Birthmarks? Yes, seen when swimming at the club. A sort of mole, the size of a quarter, on his right shoulder blade.

The question was—how to find a man thirty-six years old who played the saxophone, even if he did have a birthmark? The only real clue seemed the link between *Variety* and the saxophone. He had played with "almost professional skill." Who added the "almost"? Why not just professional skill?

"How about a picture?" he suggested. "There must have been one in the papers at the time?"

"No, there wasn't," she shook her head. "They couldn't find any pictures of him at the time. Not even in his belongings. But I do have a snapshot. He's one of a group at the club. As I recall, he didn't want to be in the picture, but one of the girls pulled him into it."

Kip studied the picture. The man was well muscled, very well muscled. Kip scowled thoughtfully. He looked fit as could be, and that didn't fit with a bank job, or with a man who didn't play tennis or golf. And who apparently went in for no sports but occasional swimming.

"How about his belongings?" Kip asked. "Were they called for?"

She shook her head. "No. He had no relatives."

"Leave any money? In the bank, I mean?"

"Only about a thousand dollars. When I think of it, that's funny, too, because he was a good businessman, and never spent very much. He lived very simply, and rarely went out."

Through a friend in the musician's union Kip tried to trace him down, and came to a dead end. Kip haunted night clubs and theatres, listened to gossip, worried at the problem like a dog over a bone.

"You know what I think?" he told Helen the next time he saw her. "I've got a hunch this Willard was a smart cookie. No relatives showed up. That's unusual. No pictures in his stuff. No clues as to his past. Aside from an occasional reference to Los Angeles, he never mentioned any place he had been or where he came from.

"I think the guy planned this job. I think he did the smart thing. I think he stepped out of his own personality for the five years you knew him, or knew of him. I think he deliberately worked into that job at the bank, waited for the right time, had his getaway worked out, then killed your husband and returned to his former life, with fifty thousand dollars!"

He thought of that again, sitting over his drink in the bar on Sixth Street. The more he considered it, the better he liked it. If that was the case, he was bucking a stacked deck. This guy was smart. He would be well covered. Kip was on his third Bourbon and soda when the idea hit him. He downed his drink and got up. He got to a telephone and called Helen Whitson.

A HALF hour later they sat across the table from each other in a cocktail lounge. "I've got a hunch," he told her. "You have hunches, so can I."

"What is it?" she asked, studying him.

"Listen," he leaned over the table, as he spoke. "This guy Willard is covered, see? He's covered like a blanket. He's had four years and fifty thousand dollars to bury himself with. He's supposed to be dead. If my guess is right, all that personality at the bank was assumed. He stepped out of himself and his natural surroundings long enough to get fifty grand, then he stepped right back into his old life. He'll be harder than a needle in a haystack to locate." Kip nodded. "We've got just one chance. His mind."

"What do you mean?" she asked, puzzled. "I don't understand."

"It's like this. He's covered, see? The perfect crime. But no man who has committed a crime, a major crime, is ever sure he's safe. There is always a little doubt, a little fear. He may have overlooked something. Somebody might recognize him.

"That's where we've got to get him—in his mind. We can't find him, so we'll make him come to us!"

Helen shook her head. "I don't see how?"

"How?" he grinned. "We'll advertise!"

"Advertise?" she exclaimed. "Are you insane?"

"No." Kip was smiling. "We'll run an ad in the *Times* and the *Examiner*. If he's in Los Angeles, he'll see it. And take my word for it, it'll scare blazes out of him. We'll run an ad inviting him to come to such a hotel to learn something of interest.

"He'll be shocked. He's been thinking he was safe. Still, under his confidence is that little, haunting fear. This ad will bring all that fear to the surface. With the fifty thousand he started with, him being the guy he is, you can bet he's gone places. He'll be big stuff, now.

"All right, he'll see that ad. He'll know then that somebody knows he's alive! Don't you see? That was his biggest protection, the fact that everybody believed Henry Willard to be dead. He'll be frightened, and he'll be curious. Who is it? What do they know? Are the police closing in? Is it blackmail? What?"

Helen's eyes were glowing. She was sitting up straight now. "It's crazy!" she said. "Absolutely crazy. But I think it will work!"

"Sure it will." Kip leaned toward her. "He won't dare stay away. It will shock him to the roots of his being. His own anxiety will be our biggest help. He'll probably not come at first. He'll try, discreetly, to find who ran the ad. He'll try to find who has that particular room in the hotel. Finally, he will send someone, on some pretext, so he can find who or what awaits him. In any event, we'll have jarred him loose. He'll be scared, and being frightened he'll be forced by his own worry to move, to do something.

Once he starts, then we can locate him. He won't have the iron will it would take to sit tight and sweat it out."

She nodded slowly. "Yes, it may work." She looked at him doubtfully. "But what if—what do you think he'll do?"

Morgan shrugged. "Who knows? He'll try to find out who it is that knows something. He'll try to find out how many know. If he learns it is just we two—he'll probably try another murder!"

Helen looked at him. "Are you afraid?"

Kip shrugged. "Not yet. But I will be. Scared as a man can be. But that won't stop me at all."

"That," she said briefly, "goes for me, too!"

The ad came out in the morning paper. It was brief and to the point, and it was in a big box in the middle of the real estate ads. (Everybody reads the real estate ads in Los Angeles!) The type was heavy. It read:

HENRY WILLARD
Who was in Newark in 1943 come to Room 1340, Hayworthy Hotel, and learn something of interest.

KIP MORGAN sat in the room and smoked. Beside him were several pocket detective novels and a few magazines. He had his coat off and it was lying on the desk at his right. Under the coat was his shoulder holster, and the butt of the gun was where he could drop a hand on it.

Down the hall, in a room with the door open a crack, sat three newsboys. They were members of a club where Kip Morgan taught boxing. Outside, the newsboy on the corner was calling his papers, his eyes wide open. Three other boys stood nearby, talking.

Noon slipped past, and it was almost three o'clock when the phone rang. Guardedly, Kip lifted the receiver. It was the switchboard operator.

"Mr. Morgan? This is the operator. You asked us to report if anyone inquired as to who was stopping in that room? We have just had a call, a man's voice. We replied as you suggested, that it was John Smith and he was receiving no telephone calls."

"Fine!" Kip hung up and walked to the window.

It was working. It could be some curious person, it could be some crank, but he didn't think so.

He rang for a bottle of beer, and was sitting tipped back in his chair with a magazine in his hands when the door opened. It was a bellboy.

Alert, Morgan noticed the way the fellow studied him, then glanced around the room. The instant the door closed after him, Kip was on his feet. He slipped to the door and gave the signal. The bellboy had scarcely reached the elevator when a nice looking youngster of fourteeen in a worn blue serge suit was standing at his elbow, also waiting.

In a few minutes the boy was back and knocking at the door. His eyes were bright and eager.

"Mr. Morgan!" he said excitedly. "The bellboy went out to the street, looked up and down, and then walked over to a Chevrolet sedan and said something to a man sitting in the car. The man gave him some money.

"I talked to Tom, on the corner, and he said the car had been there about a half hour. It just drove up and stopped. Nobody got out." He reached in his pocket. "Here's the license number."

"Thanks." Kip stepped to the phone, put in a call on the number, then returned and sat down.

In a few minutes he had a reply. It was a rented car. And, he reflected, the car would certainly be rented under an assumed name.

The day passed slowly. At dusk, he paid the boys off, and started them home, to return the next day. Then he walked down to the coffee shop, ate slowly and thoughtfully. When he had paid his check he got up and walked outside.

It wouldn't do, now, to go anywhere near Helen Whitson. He would take a walk around the block and return to the room. It had been stuffy, and his head ached. He turned left and started walking slowly along the street. He had gone less than a half block when he heard a quick step behind him.

Suddeny, startled by quickening steps behind him, he whirled. Dark shadows moved in on him and before he could get his hands up something slugged him over the head. Even as he fell to the walk, he remembered there had been the flash of a green stone on the man's hand, a stone that caught some vagrant light ray.

He hit the walk hard, and started to get up. The man struck again, and then again, and Kip's hands and knees gave way and he slipped forward into a wide black pool where there was nothing but darkness. Darkness and pain, the dull, throbbing pain in the head a man has after he has been slugged. Slowly, he fought his way out of it.

"Hey, Bill." The voice was harsh. "He's comin' out of it. Shall I slug him again?"

"No, I want to make talk with the guy." Bill's footsteps could be heard coming nearer, and Kip Morgan opened his eyes.

Slowly, he sat up.

BILL was a big man with shoulders like a pro football player and a broken nose. His cheeks were lean, and his eyes cold and hard. The other man was shorter, thicker, and had a round fat face and small eyes.

"Hi!" Kip stared at them. "Who you boys workin' for?"

Bill chuckled. "Wakes right up, don't he? Starts askin' questions right away." He studied Morgan thoughtfully. "What we want is to know who you're workin' for," he demanded. "Talk, and you can blow out of here."

"Yeah?" Kip's voice was skeptical. "Don't kid me, chum! The guy who hired you yeggs hasn't any idea of lettin' me get away. And I'm not working for anybody—I work for myself!"

"You goin' to talk, or do you take a beatin'?" Bill demanded.

His attitude told plainly enough that he was highly indifferent to the reply. Sooner or later this guy would crack, that was his attitude, if he had to give him a beating first, why that was all right, too.

"We know there's a babe in on this. You was seen with her," the short man said. "A classy doll."

"Her?" Kip laughed. "She's just a girl friend. This case was handed to me from somebody in Newark. A guy," Kip went on, "some guy in a bank. He's got an Eastern agency working on it, too."

He looked at Bill. "Why let yourself in for trouble? Don't you know what this is? It's a murder rap."

"Not mine!" Bill grinned over his broken teeth.

"Ever hear of an accessory?" Kip asked. "That's where you guys come in."

"Who was that babe?" Bill demanded.

Kip was getting mad. "None of your business!" he snapped and went off the cot with a lunge.

Bill took a quick step back, but Morgan was coming in too fast and Kip clipped the big man with a right that knocked him back into the wall.

The fat man came off his chair clawing at his hip, and Kip pivoted and threw a left hook that smashed the fat man's nose into an ugly blob, streaming with blood. Then he wheeled.

Bill's face was set in a snarl and he stepped in with his fists ready. He led with a left and Kip slipped it and whipped over a right cross that split the big man's eye. Bill staggered and shook his head.

"A boxer, huh?" he growled.

He lunged and caught Kip with a hard left, and then they closed and Kip felt the big man's arms go around him and the fellow dug his chin into Morgan's shoulder, pressing him back.

Morgan got one hand free and hooked it to Bill's ear, but the big man just burrowed his head closer. Kip dropped the edge of his hand in a chopping blow at the big man's kidney, and he jerked, trying to worm to one side, and then Kip kicked up both feet and went down hard.

The move caught Bill off balance and sent him sprawling forward, grabbing at the air for support. Kip was on his knees and coming up when the fat man hit him. He felt blood stream into his eyes but he clawed out with one hand and grabbed the fat man by the belt. Jerking him forward, Kip shot him back with all the force of his arm.

The fat man hit the table, and fell just as Kip lunged to his feet. Bill was coming in, a chair in his hands. Kip dropped to his knees and the force of Bill's rush carried him over Kip's back to the floor.

Kip Morgan got up then, and pawed the blood from his eyes. This was his dish. Several years on the waterfronts and in circus roughneck gangs had left him ready for it. He got the blood out of his eyes and as the fat man started to get up he knocked him down again with a swift kick. They had asked for it and they were going to get it.

Bill was on his feet and when Kip faced him he was looking into Bill's gun. By that time it was all one. Kip never stopped moving. When the gun blasted he felt the sting of powder on his face and heard the roar filling his ears, but the bullet missed and then Kip swung a right, low down, for Bill's stomach.

HE WAS coming in with the punch and it sank into Bill's stomach to the wrist bone. The gun flew into the air and Bill started to fall. Kip grabbed him and thrust him against the wall with his left hand and hit him three times in the stomach with his right. Then he stepped back and hit him in the face with both hands.

Bill slumped to a sitting position, bloody and battered. Kip took a quick glance at the fat man. He was lying on the floor, groaning. Morgan grabbed Bill and hoisted him onto a chair.

"All right, talk!" he said hoarsely. Morgan's breath was coming in gasps, but he was mad and ugly. They asked for it. "Talk," he said, "or I start punching!"

Bill's head rolled back and he lifted one hand. "Don't!" he said. "I'll talk! The money—was in an envelope. The bartender at the Casino give it to me. With it there was a note. Said to get you, make you tell who you were workin' for, and we'd get another five hundred."

"If you're lying," Kip said, "I'm comin' looking for you!"

"If you do," Bill said, "better carry a heater! I'll have one!"

Kip picked up his battered hat and thrust it on his head and went out the door. He retrieved his gun as he was going out and thrust it into his shoulder holster.

He got outside and looked around. He had been in a shanty in the country. Where town was, he didn't know. Where — The shot sounded an instant after he heard the angry whip of a bullet past his ear. Then as he dropped, he heard the roar of a motor.

Instantly, he was on his feet, gun in hand, and running to the road. Just as he got there he saw a car whip around the corner and vanish up the highway. Without a glance backward, he started after it, walking fast over the rutted country road.

On the highway he shoved the gun back in its holster and straightened his clothes. Pulling his tie around, he straightened it and stuffed his shirt back into his pants. Gingerly, he touched his face. One eye was badly swollen, and there was blood on his face from a cut on his scalp. Wiping it away with his handkerchief, he started up the road. When he had gone only a short distance a car swung near him.

"Want a lift?" a cheery voice called out.

He got in, and the man stared at him. He was a big, sandy haired fellow with a jovial face.

"What happened to you?" he asked, astonished. "Look like somebody's beat you up."

"Not me," Kip said grimly, "I only got part of it. They got the worst of it."

"Well, lucky I happened along," the big man said, "you're in no shape to walk. Better get in and report it to the police as quick as you can." He drove a little way. "How'd it happen? Hold up?"

"Not exactly," Kip fumbled a cigarette into his lips and lit it. "I'm a private detective."

"Oh?" The man nodded. "Case, huh? Don't think I'd care for that kind of work."

They drove on and the car picked up speed. Kip sank lower in the seat. They had evidently been some distance out of town. Suddenly he felt very tired. He nodded a little, and felt the car begin to climb.

The man at the wheel kept on talking, his voice droning along, talking of crimes and murders and Kip, half asleep, replied in monosyllables. Through the drone of talk the question slipped into his consciousness even as he answered, and for a startled moment, his head still hanging on his chest, the question and answer came back.

"Who are you working for?" the driver had asked.

And he had replied, mumbling and half awake, "Helen Whitson."

AS REALIZATION hit him, his head came up with a jerk and stared into the malevolent blue eyes of the big man behind the wheel. He saw the gun coming up. With a yell, he struck it aside with his left hand just as his right almost automatically shoved down hard on the door handle. The next instant he was sprawling in the road.

He staggered to his feet, grabbing for his own gun, only to find the holster empty. The gun had fallen out as he fell from the car. A gun bellowed and he staggered and went over the bank just as it roared again, behind him.

How far he fell he did not know. It was all of thirty feet of rolling, bumping and falling. He brought up with a jolt, and heard the trickle of gravel and falling rock. Then he saw the shape of the big man loom up on the edge of the road. In a minute, the man would be coming down. He would never leave a job half done. The shape disappeared, and he could hear the fellow fumbling in the car—for a flashlight!

Horror struck. Kip rolled over and staggered to his feet. He lunged into the bushes, slipping between two big clumps of brush just as the flashlight stabbed the darkness. Catlike, he moved away. Every step was an agony. One ankle was badly hurt in the fall, and his head was throbbing with waves of pain. He forced himself to move, to keep going.

Now he could hear the trickle of gravel as the big man came down the bank. Stepping lightly, and favoring the injured ankle, he slipped away through the brush. Somewhere he could hear water falling, and he could see the high loom of cliffs. The big man was not using his flashlight now, and he was stalking him; stalking him like a hunter stalks game.

Kip crouched, listening, like a wounded animal. Then he felt a loose tree limb at his feet. Gently, he picked it up and placed it in the crotch of a low bush so that it stuck out across the trail. Then, feeling on the ground, he picked up a stone the size of his fist.

Footsteps came nearer, cautious footsteps and heavy breathing. Listening, Kip gained confidence. The man was no woodsman. Pain wracked his brain and he felt clumsily at his lips with his tongue. They were swollen and split.

Carefully, soundlessly, Kip moved back. The big man did what he hoped. He walked forward, blundered into the limb and tripped, losing his balance. Then Kip let go with the rock. It hit, but not on the man's head. Then the gun flashed, the shot missing Kip by inches, and turning he began to run and hobble away.

He made the creek and followed it down a ways, and then ahead of him a house loomed. He could hear someone on the porch speaking.

"Sounded like a shot," they said. "Right back up the canyon!"

He lay down then, pressing his face against the ground. Behind him, there was no sound, then after a long wait, the noise of a motor starting up. Kip Morgan staggered to his feet then, and hearing the movement in the house, he stumbled up on the porch and banged against the door. It opened almost instantly. A tall, fine looking man with gray hair was facing him. The man's eyes opened wide.

"Got to get me into town," Kip said, "and quick! There's going to be a murder if I don't!"

All the way into town Kip knotted his hands together, staring at the road. He had been back up in one of the canyons. How far, he never knew. Desperately, he tried to calculate the time lost. It had taken him several minutes to show his identification and to get the man to drive him into town. It had taken more minutes of effort to get the man to lend him a gun.

THE older man could drive, and he did. Whining and wheeling around curves and down the streets, he finally leveled out on the street leading to the apartment Helen Whitson had sub-let from some friends in West Hollywood. As they turned the corner Kip saw the car parked in front of the house. and the house was dark.

"Stop here!" He hit the ground while the car was still rolling. "Get the police!" he said.

Moving like a ghost, forcing himself to walk on the injured ankle, Kip crossed the lawn and moved up to the house. The front door was closed. He slipped around to the side, and saw the door there was standing open. He got inside and as he eased up the three steps he heard a sudden gasp, and saw a glimmer of light. Then he heard a low voice.

"Hello, Helen!" a man said.

"*You*, Henry!"

"Yes, Helen, it's been a long time. Too bad you couldn't have let well enough alone. If your husband hadn't been such an honest fool, I could never have tricked him as I did. And this detective of yours, he's a blunderer!"

"Where is Morgan? What have you done to him?"

"I've killed him, I think. Anyway, with you dead I'll feel safer. I was afraid this might happen, so I've already made plans to disappear again if I have to. But first I'm going to kill you."

Kip Morgan was at the door now, and he turned into it gradually, and saw Helen's eyes find him. Yet there was no flicker of expression in them to warn Willard. Then a board creaked. Willard wheeled like a cat, but before he could fire, Kip knocked the gun from his hands and dropped his own.

"I want you," Morgan said harshly, "for the chair!"

The big man lunged toward him, and spreading his legs, Kip hit him, left and right, in the face. The big man squealed like a stuck pig and sprang back, blood streaming down his face. Then Morgan walked in and hit him three times. Desperately, the big man pawed at him trying to get him off. Kip jerked him clear of the bed, and hit him again.

A siren cut the night with a slash of sound, and then almost as soon as they heard it, the car was slithering to a stop outside.

Helen pulled her robe about her, her face pale. Kip Morgan picked Willard up and shoved him against the wall. Hatred blazed in the man's eyes, but what strength there had been in him four years ago had gone soft with easy living. The door opened and two plainclothes men came in with several uniformed policemen.

"Hey!" The first one stopped, staring. "Say, what is this?"

"Lieutenant Brady, isn't it?" Kip said. "This guy is Henry Willard. There's a murder rap hanging over him in New Jersey, also a matter of a fifty thousand dollar payroll job!"

"Willard?" Brady exclaimed. "Why, kid, this is James Howard Kendall. He owns the Mario Dine and Dance spot, and about a dozen other things around here. Known him since I was a kid, just a couple of years older than he was."

"Sure," Morgan agreed. "He went East, took the name of Willard, and—"

"Brady," Willard interrupted. "This is all a case of mistaken identity. You know me perfectly well. Take this man in, I want to prefer charges for assault and battery against him. I'll be in first thing in the morning."

"You leave here over my dead body!" Kip said sharply.

"Morgan, that's no way to talk," Brady was puzzled. "I've known Mr. Kendall for years, now—"

"All right, ask him what he was doing in this house." Kip snapped. "Ask him how he came to drive up here in the night and come into a dark house."

KENDALL hesitated, then he spoke suddenly. "Why, Brady, I met this girl tonight, made a date with her. This was an attempt at a badger game."

"Mighty funny," the gray haired man who had driven Morgan to town spoke up, "mighty funny way to run a badger game. This man," he indicated Morgan, "staggered onto my porch half beaten to death and asked me to rush him to town to prevent a murder. It was he that sent me after the police. And this house was dark when he started up to it."

"All you'll need are his fingerprints," Kip said quietly. "This man murdered a payroll guard, stole the money, and changed clothes with the murdered man. Then he came back and got into business using the proceeds from the robbery."

Brady's eyes gleamed. "Ah?" he said. "Maybe you've got something, Morgan. We always wondered where he came into that money!"

Kendall wheeled suddenly and sprang for the window, hurling himself through the glass in one great leap. The glass and the whole window shattered under the impact. He had made but two steps when Kip Morgan swept up his gun and fired.

Kendall was running directly away from him toward the car. Kip fired twice, and the big man fell, sprawling out on the lawn.

"You've killed him!" Brady said.

"No," Kip replied quietly, "just broken a leg. He's all yours."

As the police filed out, Kip turned to Helen Whitson. She was looking at him, and her eyes were glowing.

"You did it!" she said. "I just knew you could!" Then she added. "And you've earned yourself five thousand dollars!"

"It's a nice sum," he agreed. "When are you leaving?"

"I've got to go back to New York for Bobby," she told him.

"Don't go yet," he said. He took her by the shoulders. "In a couple of days, my lips won't be so swollen. They aren't quite right for kissing a girl now, but—"

"But I'll bet you could," she suggested, laughing at him, "if you tried!"

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 9)

signment to write an article on "Your Happy Vacation." It is to be about South America. Hence Libby has to meet a sailor who works on the steamer *Star of Brazil.*

No—he's not coming here to Dufrey's! Libby is to bring Johnny to the sailor's apartment. It really belongs to his sister, who is in Michigan now, Mrs. Herbert Hotchkiss. The sailor's name is Buddy Bohen. He must be all right, because he is a friend of Joe Giff. Libby says she has known Joe Giff for years.

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That's the way it goes folks—wisecrack after wisecrack with one grim and gripping situation following another! If you're a Johnny Castle fan, you'll know what to expect. If you've never met Johnny and Libby and Mullin and Hartley—here's a swell time to get acquainted. The old red bandwagon is waiting! You'll be surprised how the dead sailor, Dufrey's, and Dolf Callise all tie in when you get to the smash climax of this bang-up novelet!

Our third big headliner for the next issue:

MURDER ON MIDNIGHT
by
WYATT BLASSINGAME

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two families to each key, of course. It is wild rugged country, with mysterious bayous and eerie swamplands—sultry days and threatening, tropic nights. It is a land of mystery, intrigue and hidden hate.

There is Henry Hollister, known as both "captain" and "judge," the former because he has a boat, the latter because of his dignified appearance. There is also his neurotic and imaginative wife who "thinks" she sees things. Perhaps she does—who knows. Much that she prophesies comes to pass in a weird and macabre way.

There is Charles Ross, who amassed a selfish fortune making others unhappy by foreclosing mortgages, seizing the land of the unfortunate. There is his divorced wife who also always hated him. She has returned

[*Turn page*]

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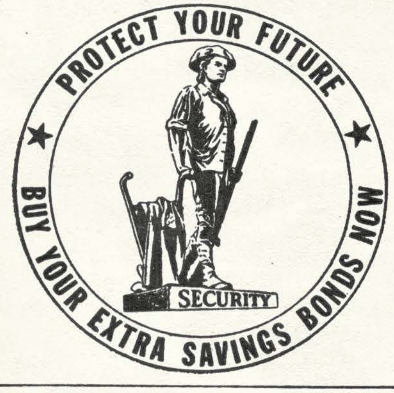
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there now as Mrs. Allen, bringing her newly acquired husband along. They are now the guests of the Pattersons—down at the far end of the key. There is a shriek in the night and the sound of a shot. Dawn finds the body of Ross washed on the shore, his head bashed in against the concrete. It looks like an accident and yet—

This, friends, is as nicely conceived and executed a novelet of murder and its solution as we have ever presented! The dialogue is tense, the situations gripping, the characters intriguing. Furthermore, it contains a startling psychological twist. Look forward to a grand yarn!

Besides the foregoing headliners, there will be a swell outlay of up-to-the-minute short stories. All in all, as corking an issue as we've ever put out!

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

WE'LL begin this time with a nice pat on the back for ourselves. It is a boost from a part of the good old U.S.A. we have always liked. The letter seems to us to be just as frank and sincere as the sunny skies of that state. Here goes:

> Gentlemen: I've got to hand it to you fellows at Headquarters. There is a thrill in reading every story in your THRILLING DETECTIVE.
>
> I read lots of detective fiction magazines, but in my estimation, your book really has what it takes to make it tops—with the best from so many popular writers.
>
> Congrats on the bigger book.—*Ralph F. Bassett, Tempe, Arizona.*

Thanks, Ralph, old pal, for a fine letter. Our next epistle is concerned with our authors:

> My favorite authors in THRILLING DETECTIVE are J. Lane Linklater, Roger Fuller, C. S. Montanye,

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William Chamberlain, John L. Benton and Carter Sprague. Thanks to them all for many hours of interesting reading.—*Walter F. Blount, Boston, Mass.*

Our thanks to you, Walter, and nice picking, we would say. We'll try to keep up the good work.

The above letters are typical of hundreds of others gratefully received. And now here's one with a bit of a complaint:

> I think some of your clues are very flimsy. Also I do not believe five one-thousand-dollar bills could be hidden in the finger-holes of a bowling ball, as appeared in your story "Sixteen Pounds of Murder."
> —*Jefferson Wynne, Cedar Rapids, Ia.*

Ever try it, Jeff? We believe it can be done. Thanks for your letter. If you weren't interested, you wouldn't write in, and we appreciate your interest. Keep those letters and postcards streaming in, everybody! Your comments and suggestions are mighty helpful. Please address them to The Editor, THRILLING DETECTIVE magazine, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thank you!

See you next issue, folks!

—THE EDITOR.

Next Issue's Headliners!

HIBISCUS AND HOMICIDE

A Complete Mystery Novel

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•

THIS WILL KILL YOU

A Johnny Castle Novelet

By C. S. MONTANYE

•

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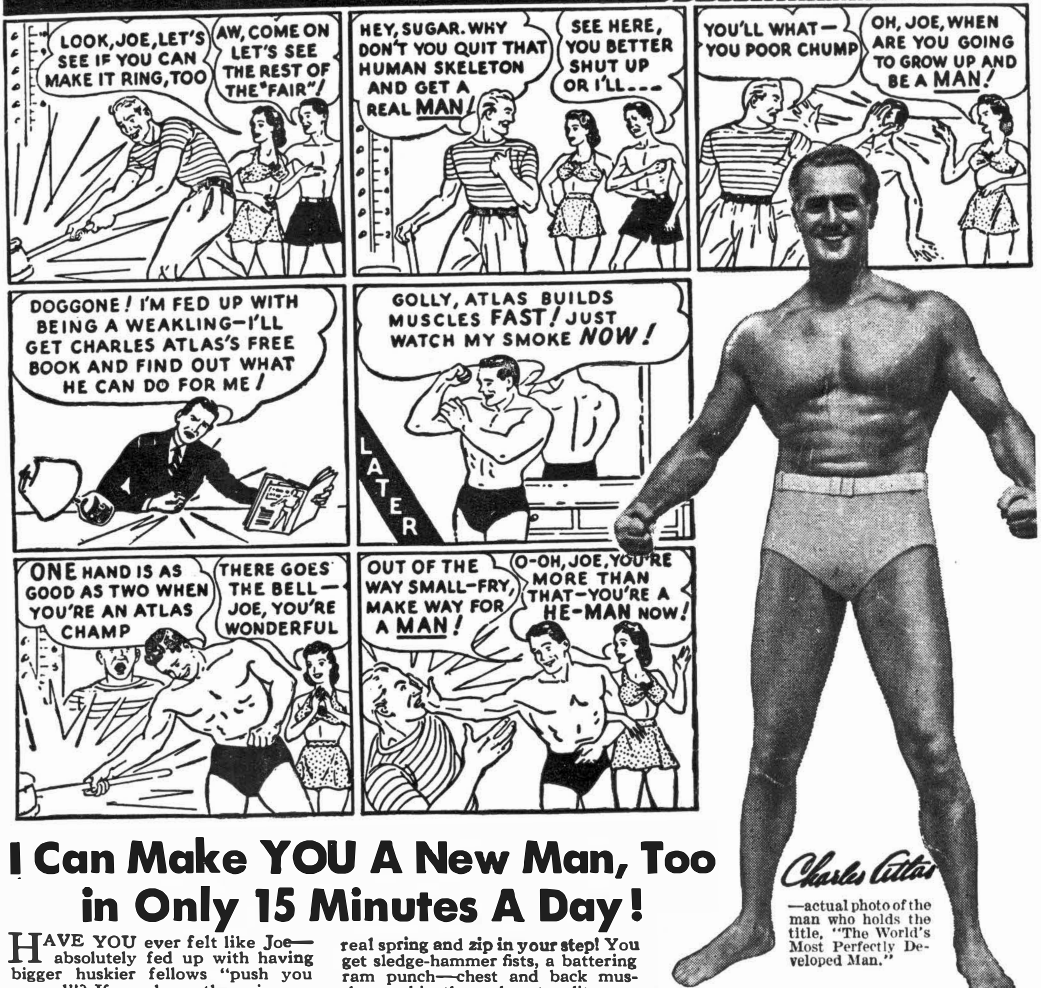
LOOK, JOE, LET'S SEE IF YOU CAN MAKE IT RING, TOO
AW, COME ON LET'S SEE THE REST OF THE "FAIR"!
HEY, SUGAR. WHY DON'T YOU QUIT THAT HUMAN SKELETON AND GET A REAL MAN!
SEE HERE, YOU BETTER SHUT UP OR I'LL...
YOU'LL WHAT— YOU POOR CHUMP
OH, JOE, WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO GROW UP AND BE A MAN!
DOGGONE! I'M FED UP WITH BEING A WEAKLING—I'LL GET CHARLES ATLAS'S FREE BOOK AND FIND OUT WHAT HE CAN DO FOR ME!
GOLLY, ATLAS BUILDS MUSCLES FAST! JUST WATCH MY SMOKE NOW!
LATER
ONE HAND IS AS GOOD AS TWO WHEN YOU'RE AN ATLAS CHAMP
THERE GOES THE BELL— JOE, YOU'RE WONDERFUL
OUT OF THE WAY SMALL-FRY, MAKE WAY FOR A MAN!
O-OH, JOE, YOU'RE MORE THAN THAT—YOU'RE A HE-MAN NOW!
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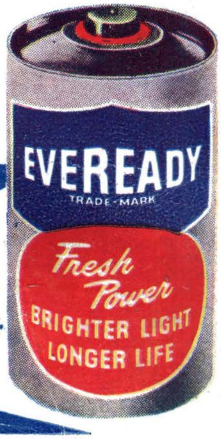

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